

# **JESUS, A HERO OF COMPASSION**

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## **Abstract**

### **Jesus, A Hero of Compassion**

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One of the best and most helpful ways of viewing the story of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark is as a Greco-Roman hero story. I argue, however, that not only is the story of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark a Greco-Roman hero story, but one that makes strategic adjustments to the hero template. This can be seen by comparing the Gospel of Mark with the works of Homer. In this dissertation, I first outline the common characteristics of hero stories before explaining how Jesus in the Gospel of Mark fits that description. I then defend the idea that the author of the Gospel of Mark intentionally composed his story that way, rather than merely passing along eyewitness accounts inherited from oral tradition. I then look to the *Iliad* for tensions in the hero story particularly related to courage and spend the rest of the dissertation explaining how the Gospel of Mark deals with these tensions. I look first at the problem of death and honor in the ancient world, and how Mark's solution to both differs radically from the *Iliad*. I then utilize mimesis criticism to show how Jesus rejects the path of violence followed by most Greco-Roman heroes, creating a non-violent hero story. Here I utilize a story from the *Odyssey*. I then turn to the problem of justice and knowledge, how one is to learn courage and know the right course of action. Here I dialogue most especially with Plato and his appraisal of the poetic tradition. I then wrap up the dissertation by looking at how this might change our understanding of Christian origins and background information that should be provided to students in this field. I do this with a focus on Asclepius as a hero similar to Jesus. In the end, I want to show how Jesus is a very different kind of Greco-Roman hero in the Gospel of Mark.

To my parents, Tom and Connie Gorham—

Without your unwavering belief in me from the very beginning, none of this would have  
been possible.

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## *Introduction*

The Gospels are the last marvelous expression of the Greek genius, as the *Iliad* is the first: here the Greek spirit reveals itself not only in the injunction given mankind to seek above all other goods, ‘the kingdom and justice of our Heavenly Father,’ but also in the fact that human suffering is laid bare, and we see it in a being who is at once divine and human.

—Simone Weil, “The Iliad, or the Poem of Force”

If one is not a New Testament scholar, one may see with little difficulty ... that stories of the life of Jesus were very much set in the mold of the stories of the ancient heroes.

—Gregory J. Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*

The above quotes may be a surprising way to open a dissertation on the Gospel of Mark in the minds of many New Testament scholars. After all, if there is one thing the field has settled on almost unanimously, it is that Jesus was Jewish, his initial followers were Jewish, and that Christianity got its start as a Jewish sect. Countless hours of scholarly effort have been poured into depicting Jesus as thoroughly Jewish and repeatedly emphasizing the Jewish roots of Christianity. Israel gets the distinction of being the cultivated olive tree with deep roots according to the Apostle Paul, whereas Gentiles came in later, wild olive shoots grafted onto the tree contrary to nature (Romans 11:17-24). So why consider the Gospel of Mark, which tells the story of the ministry of Jesus, as “the last marvelous expression of the Greek genius,” according to Simone Weil, a story about Jesus that is “set in the mold of the stories of the ancient heroes” described in Greco-Roman mythology?

I would never contest that Jesus was Jewish, that his early followers were primarily Jewish, and that early Christianity started as a Jewish sect. All this is well-established. But what I

want to insist upon is that it is more precisely understood as a *Hellenistic* Jewish phenomenon, and the adjective is important. There is a reason the Jesus movement transitioned so quickly from a Jewish sect to a Gentile religion. It has always had deep roots in the Greco-Roman world as well. Our earliest texts from this movement come from the “Apostle to the Gentles” (Romans 11:13), and the earliest Gospel we have preserved, the Gospel of Mark, has Greco-Roman roots as well.

The story of Jesus, as presented in the Gospel of Mark, *is* a Greco-Roman hero story. It displays Jesus as manifesting all the necessary characteristics to qualify him as a Greco-Roman hero. The earliest Gentile followers of Jesus would have recognized the pattern of Jesus’s life as modeled after the hero story, and this helps account for their early acceptance of the movement. But it is not just any hero story. It presents Jesus as an alternative to the heroes on offer in that culture, an alternative the author of Mark believed to be superior. The Gospel of Mark is a serious intellectual attempt to resolve certain tensions evident in the hero stories of its day, portraying Jesus as a superior model of imitation. By comparing the Gospel of Mark with the works of Homer, particularly the *Iliad*, one can see its author resolving tensions and perceived inadequacies in Homer’s account of the heroic life. I would further argue that any attempt at understanding the Gospel of Mark that does not take this into account, which is the case in most current New Testament scholarship, is inadequate. It misses an incredibly important feature of the Gospel, and not a minor feature, but something that would have appeared as obvious to its early readers.

So what follows will differ from most dissertations on the Gospel of Mark. It is a comparative work, contrasting the Gospel of Mark with the works of Homer, as well as Homer’s reception in Plato. I do this not because the Gospel of Mark has more in common with heroes in



the Homeric literature than with any other heroes. The hero most like Jesus is Asclepius, who will be discussed in the last chapter. But Homer was chosen because he is the most important writer in the ancient world as well as the most well-known, and one who gives a singularly rich portrayal of the heroic life. If the story of Jesus was meant to be compared with the stories of other heroes, one must start that work of comparison somewhere, and Homer is a good place to start. I hope myself and others can build upon this dissertation with comparisons of other heroic accounts in the future.

After reviewing the relatively meager scholarship that has been done on this issue, every chapter of the argument will be outlined below.

### **Review of Scholarship**

Unfortunately, very little has been written about the Gospel of Mark that seriously argues that Jesus should be understood as a Greco-Roman hero. Some commentaries, like one from Francis J. Moloney, never mention Homer or Greco-Roman heroes at all.<sup>1</sup> Nor was I able to locate a reference to either in Ben Witherington III's commentary.<sup>2</sup> Healy and Williamson argue that "the Gospel of Mark and the three other canonical Gospels are unlike any other kind of literature."<sup>3</sup> They think they are "roughly analogous to ancient biographies" but are "unique in that they are written from a standpoint of living faith in Jesus Christ."<sup>4</sup> Donahue and Harrington are dismissive, saying, "Despite the claims for various influences of Greco-Roman literature on Mark (and elsewhere), the gospel contains no quotation of any Greco-Roman author and no

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<sup>1</sup> Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Mary Healy and Peter Williamson, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 38.

<sup>4</sup> Healy and Williamson, *The Gospel of Mark*, 38.

allusion to any significant public figure apart from Herod and Pilate. Mark's 'pre-texts' are the Jewish Scriptures."<sup>5</sup>

Another approach is taken by Mark L. Strauss, who argues that "the Gospels arose in the Greco-Roman literary environment and the Evangelists were no doubt influenced by this environment and by various literary exemplars."<sup>6</sup> He identifies the "most widely accepted" antecedent as *bioi*, or lives of famous figures. He is hesitant to adopt this characterization however, arguing that "the Gospels are unique in both their origin and their content."<sup>7</sup> No mention is made of Homer, heroes, or even individual heroes such as Heracles or Asclepius in the subject index.

Some scholars acknowledge the possible rivalry with and dependence on the works of Homer, but do so briefly. Bartosz Adamczewski writes that the repeated predictions of Jesus's death, who goes to meet his fate bravely despite this knowledge, "clearly evokes Greek epic and tragedy, especially Homer's *Iliad*. In this most famous work of Greek literature, Hector repeatedly receives predictions that he will soon die ... and nevertheless goes ahead to fight against Achilles ... Mark in a similar way depicted the behavior of Jesus."<sup>8</sup> I would agree with Adamczewski here, but would argue that the parallels run deeper than that. Adela Yarbro Collins's approach will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Seven, but in short she limits her account of the parallels between Mark and other Greco-Roman literature to a likely Gentile

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<sup>5</sup> John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 28.

<sup>6</sup> Mark L. Strauss, *Mark: Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 26-27.

<sup>7</sup> Strauss, *Mark*, 27.

<sup>8</sup> Bartosz Adamczewski, *The Gospel of Mark: A Hypertextual Commentary* (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), 112.

response to the text, but does not state that it is part of the text itself.<sup>9</sup> There are limited exceptions to this found in her commentary.<sup>10</sup>

The most significant monograph on Jesus as a Greco-Roman hero is written by Gregory J. Riley.<sup>11</sup> This work is a sustained argument for treating Jesus as a heroic figure, and will help provide the foundations for Chapters One and Two in this work. My work here can be seen as an attempt to build on this monograph by focusing on the strategic differences Mark employs in his depiction of Jesus as a hero. Another work that discusses Jesus in the context of the *Iliad* is written by Louis Markos.<sup>12</sup> His intended audience seems to be conservative Christians who are uncomfortable with reading “pagan” literature. One comment typical of his work suggests that “though the fullness of deity is found only in Christ and the fullness of his revelation in the Bible alone, the shadow of the Almighty yet hovers and broods over the yearnings of the pre-Christian world.”<sup>13</sup> He hopes through his work to aid the task of preserving “our Judeo-Christian, Greco-Roman culture.”<sup>14</sup> Another work comparing Jesus with other heroic figures is a monograph by Richard C. Miller. He focuses primarily on the resurrection of Jesus, which he argues comes from translation fables common to the ancient Mediterranean world such as the stories of Heracles and Romulus.<sup>15</sup> One can also find articles comparing Jesus with figures such as Heracles or Asclepius, and these will be discussed throughout this work.

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<sup>9</sup> Adela Yarbro Collins, *Collected Essays on the Gospel According to Mark* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2022), 80-95.

<sup>10</sup> For an example, see Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 150.

<sup>11</sup> Gregory J. Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> Louis Markos, *From Achilles to Christ: Why Christians Should Read the Pagan Classics* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Markos, *From Achilles to Christ*, 22.

<sup>14</sup> Markos, *From Achilles to Christ*, 24.

<sup>15</sup> Richard C. Miller, *Resurrection and Reception in Early Christianity* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 26-90.

Perhaps the most prolific writer comparing the Gospel narratives with Homer is Dennis R. MacDonald. He has written many books on this subject, of which I would most especially recommend *The Gospels and Homer*.<sup>16</sup> *Luke and Vergil* is its equally helpful counterpart.<sup>17</sup> MacDonald's project endeavors to show that the Gospels of Mark and Luke imitated stories from Homer when constructing their narratives. MacDonald talks about the interpretability of these connections briefly throughout, whereas I attempt to center interpretability in this work and am less concerned with convincing the reader that Mark received most of his literary models from Homer. I instead want to demonstrate what it means that Jesus is a Greco-Roman hero.

### **Chapter Outline**

Chapter One is entitled "Heroes in the Greco-Roman World," and the goal of this chapter is to outline the meaning of the category "hero." It is an important and necessary category for Greco-Roman religion; indeed, it would be impossible to understand the religion of that world without it. Because of the prominence and importance of the category, it has a number of different attributes and somewhat porous boundaries, and so I utilize many sources to paint the clearest picture I am able of this phenomenon. Hesiod's ages of humanity are explicated and the ways in which heroes differ from and are related to the gods and humanity are explored. The biggest difference between heroes and gods is that heroes, without exception, die, and the gods do not. Nevertheless, heroes remain active after death and have real impacts on the lives of the communities surrounding them. Readers are encouraged, as they go along, to look for similarities

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<sup>16</sup> Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Gospels and Homer: Imitations of Greek Epic in Mark and Luke-Acts* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

<sup>17</sup> Dennis R. MacDonald, *Luke and Vergil: Imitations of Classical Greek Literature* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

to and differences from the Jesus story. The focus of the chapter, however, is simply to create in the minds of readers a picture of what a hero is. I have endeavored to be as fair as possible in this chapter, not casting an image of the hero that is skewed to closely fit the Jesus story, but describing the phenomenon accurately and letting readers draw their own conclusions as they go.

In Chapter Two, “Jesus the Literary Hero,” I go beyond the task of describing a hero and make the argument that the story of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark is another Greco-Roman hero story. Frequent references to the attributes articulated in Chapter One are made, and I attempt to show how Jesus satisfies the necessary criteria to be considered a hero, perhaps most notably through his death. However, readers should not expect perfect overlap with Chapter One. The category of hero is complex, and not every attribute manifested by any particular heroic character is going to be found in Jesus’s story. But a surprisingly high number of overlaps exist, overlaps that are significant enough to call the story of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark a hero story.

I also spend significant time in Chapter Two discussing the production of literature in the ancient Greco-Roman world in order to counter a common objection to my thesis, which is that the Gospel of Mark is simply recording oral tradition, passed down through Christian communities, rooted in the eyewitness accounts of the first disciples. Because of this, the story of Jesus cannot be a heroic tale, first because Mark is recording history and, second, because Mark is just writing down oral tradition, not shaping and forming a coherent, unified, literary product like a gifted author would. The task of telling Christian origins has frequently rooted itself in dubious and unverifiable accounts of a singular, unified “Markan community” with its own theological agenda from which we get the text of our Gospel, in which the author simply recorded the oral tradition preserved by this singular community, placing one story after another like beads on a string. These accounts, while well-intentioned, usually pay scant attention to the

way writing actually occurred in the ancient Roman world. I aim to rectify this by looking at how writing worked in the first century. There is little indication that authors composed in the way commonly suggested in modern accounts of Christian origins. Rather, authors were trained in the art of mimesis, imitating pre-existing literary models, above all Homer, in their work. We can be confident, based on our knowledge of literary practices in the first century, that the author of the Gospel of Mark was part of a small group of individuals who possessed an advanced rhetorical education and could compose a full narrative. We can also be confident that he would have seen himself as part of a larger community of writers, both imitating and rivaling the stories written before him. There is every reason to believe that the author of Mark set out to rival other hero stories by creating one himself, only one with a superior hero, Jesus. This account of Christian origins makes more sense, and accounts for more of the data we have on ancient writing practices, than the conventional account. There is no reason to dismiss out of hand Mark's literary talent, as though he was nothing more than a scribe writing down verbatim what was told to him by an early Christian community.

Chapter Three, "What Kind of Hero?", then turns to the *Iliad* directly, perhaps the most important surviving account we have related to how heroism was envisioned. If, as the first two chapters established, Jesus is best envisioned as a hero, it is important next to evaluate what kind of hero Jesus is. What sets him apart from the majority of other heroic figures? What makes his account worth preserving and what makes him a credible rival to other significant heroic figures? I aim to explore that in the rest of the dissertation. Chapter Three brings out certain tensions in the heroic model that are present in the *Iliad* and that the Gospel of Mark resolves. These three tensions are first the question of motivation. Why should someone be heroic? Why not live a blissful, conflict-free life safely at one's home and enjoy one's children and the process of

growing old surrounded by family and community? The second is the question of violence. Is violence really the best way to demonstrate one's courage and heroism? Or does violence have too high a cost, leaving room for a depiction of a nonviolent hero? The third is the question of knowledge. How does one know the heroic thing to do in any situation? Is it related to the divine will in any particular way? How does one learn the truth? These questions get fuller explorations in the following three chapters but are introduced here. The central idea is that there are tensions in the heroic narrative that do not always receive satisfying answers in the *Iliad*, and the Gospel of Mark has alternative answers in its account of the heroic life, answers that the author believes are better and more compelling than those provided by Homer.

Chapter Four turns to the first tension, "The Problem of Death and Honor." The motivation for courage in the face of death provided in the *Iliad* is honor and unending fame. One receives recognition and honor from one's peers, as well as from the poets, who ensure that one's accomplishments are never forgotten but are told and retold in every succeeding generation, making one's fame and reputation live on for eternity. This is necessary because the afterlife is viewed as an insubstantial and rather miserable place by the ancient world. The problems with these reasons are apparent already in the *Iliad*. Consequently, this chapter spends a significant amount of time looking at the virtue of courage, notions of honor, as well as the promise of unending fame for those who win glory for themselves on the battlefield. Greco-Roman notions of the afterlife are also explored. Following this, attention is paid to the alternative answer provided by the Gospel of Mark. In contrast to the grim view of the afterlife promised by the *Iliad*, in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus bears witness to the Kingdom of God, a reality at hand for all its participants, even if the benefits are frequently delayed. The conflict over receiving one's proper honor that runs throughout the whole of the *Iliad* is repudiated by the

Gospel of Mark. One does not seek honor for themselves in this Gospel. Seeking honor or fame or prizes in this life is a fool's errand, something suggested implicitly by the *Iliad* and affirmed outright in the Gospel of Mark. One must wait for the coming Kingdom of God to receive one's reward, which will be given to those who reject questing after honor for themselves and instead live a life of humble service.

Chapter Five turns to the next tension in the heroic life, "The Problem of Violence." In Homer, the heroic life is also a violent one. Achilles is the greatest warrior on the battlefield, and his fame lives on forevermore, but his life is a short and violent one. The Gospel of Mark, by contrast, turns Jesus into a nonviolent hero. Jesus has enemies he fights, but they are spiritual, not physical. His time is spent not slaying others but casting out demons and healing diseases, bringing health and wholeness to those to whom he ministers. To draw this out, I build on the work of Dennis R. MacDonald, who located a number of similarities between the stories of Odysseus fighting against Polyphemus and Circe in the *Odyssey* and Jesus's confrontation with the Gerasene demoniac. The similarities between the stories are pointed out, not necessarily to prove that Mark was imitating this particular story (although that remains a distinct possibility), but to show that they can be fruitfully compared. The differences between the two heroes's approaches are evident. Odysseus secures victory through trickery and violence. Jesus secures victory through healing the demonized man. The political implications of the Gospel of Mark become apparent in this story as well, and those are explored. The Gospel of Mark, through the story of the Gerasene demoniac, shows Jesus's approach to dealing with the Roman Empire, rejecting both complicity and violent revolution in favor of nonviolent resistance and modeling a better way of being in the world. Jesus's rejection of the purity system is also explored at some



length, as it too becomes apparent in this story. Through this close exegesis of one story in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus's nonviolent approach to the heroic life comes clearly into view.

Chapter Six turns to the third and final tension to be explored, "The Problem of Justice and Knowledge." Here we depart from looking at Homer directly and instead look at how his work was received by Plato. Part of the problem with the heroic life as conceived by Homer is that the gods are unjust and frequently dishonest. They cannot be relied upon to do the right thing or to maintain justice despite protestations to the contrary. Consequently, how is one to learn the right thing to do? How can one become a just person? This became a serious concern of Plato's, whose objections are explored in this chapter. The idea of righteousness in the Greek tradition is likewise discussed, as well as Jesus's rejection of strict fidelity to the rules in favor of an ethic of compassion. In the end, Jesus is the kind of hero that even a critic such as Plato might have been able to affirm. Our attention then turns to the different ways of knowing that were articulated by Plato, by the Hebrew Bible, and, very briefly, by Homer. In the end, the Gospel of Mark, while accepting and taking Plato's concerns about the poetic tradition seriously, rejects the Platonic way of knowing in favor of direct revelation from God. What we are left with in the Gospel of Mark is a Jesus who offers few ethical precepts outside of a commitment to compassion and little assurance in this life that one is on the correct path. One cannot rely on the surety of knowledge promised by the Platonic tradition, or that one will be rewarded for one's service in this life at all. Nevertheless, Mark calls his readers to follow Jesus into the unknown anyway.

Finally, Chapter Seven provides the conclusion, possible avenues for future research, and discusses the implications of this dissertation on our understanding of Christian origins. Particular attention is paid here to Asclepius, a heroic figure who does not figure prominently in Homer but is perhaps the hero most similar to Jesus and the strongest rival the Jesus movement

had from Greco-Roman religion. I argue that, if the dissertation is compelling, it makes other parallels to figures like Asclepius even more plausible, and that these must become a part of the background information given to students of the New Testament. I attempt to illustrate in this chapter what a greater knowledge of the Greco-Roman world, and of figures like Asclepius, can bring to our understanding of the Gospel of Mark.

The Gospel of Mark is a serious attempt at engaging some of the toughest issues in the intellectual milieu of the ancient Greco-Roman world. Far from being the work of an unsophisticated scribe copying down oral tradition, it is a coherent and existentially challenging endeavor to paint a contrasting picture of what a hero can and should be. My hope is that, after reading these pages, the reader walks away struck by the artistic and intellectual audacity of the Gospel of Mark.

## **Chapter One: Heroes in the Greco-Roman World**

In order to establish a connection between the Gospel of Mark and the *Iliad*, so as to justify the task of comparison that is the focus of this dissertation, one must begin by establishing what a hero is and what role heroes played in the Greco-Roman world. That is the focus of this chapter. The following chapter will make explicit the connection between Greco-Roman heroes and Jesus the hero. If it is true that the narrative in the Gospel of Mark is analogous to the stories of other Greco-Roman heroes, that the story of Mark would have been readily recognizable to its early readers and hearers as a hero story, then it makes sense to compare the Gospel with the seminal Greek myth on heroes and heroism, the *Iliad*, along with the *Odyssey* and other appraisals of the Homeric tradition. As Christopher Wood notes, “Of all the works of the ancient world, none has captured the essence of the hero more than Homer’s *Iliad*.”<sup>1</sup> This comparison should be done regardless of whether or not Mark had the *Iliad* in mind as he composed his story, as there were an abundance of heroic stories to choose from, but none equals in importance those of Homer. The Gospel of Mark and the *Iliad* share the same subject matter, and so can be fruitfully compared.

In his *Works and Days*, Hesiod tells the myth of the ages of humankind. There are five ages, four of which are associated with metal: first the golden age, then silver, then bronze, then the age of heroes, then the iron age. The first age is the golden age, and as for the people, “just like gods they spent their lives, with a spirit free from care, entirely apart from toil and distress.”<sup>2</sup> Old age did not overpower them, they died peaceful deaths, they had everything they needed for

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Wood, *Heroes Masked and Mythic* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2021), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Hesiod, *Works and Days*, in *Hesiod: Theogony, Works and Days, Testimonia*, ed. and trans. Glenn W. Most, LCL 57 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 112-113.

a good life upon the earth, and currently watch over it as guardian spirits, dispensing blessings. Following the golden age was the silver age, this one much worse. Things deteriorated further with the subsequent bronze age, an age of beings who “cared only for the painful works of Ares and for acts of violence.”<sup>3</sup> Currently, Hesiod is living in the iron age, the worst one of all. Its residents “will not cease from toil and distress by day, nor from being worn out by suffering at night, and the gods will give them grievous cares.”<sup>4</sup> In this age, there is no “grace ... for the just man or the good one, but they will give more honor to the doer of evil ... Justice will be in their hands, and reverence will not exist, but the bad man will harm the superior one, speaking with crooked discourses.”<sup>5</sup> It would have been better for Hesiod, in his estimation, to live in any other age besides this current one.

But in the midst of this tale of the deterioration of humanity, there is one lone bright spot. Between the bronze and iron ages there is another, a fourth age. This is the age of heroes. The age of heroes was “more just and superior”<sup>6</sup> than the ages immediately surrounding it. The inhabitants are called ἡμίθεοι, literally “half-gods” or “demigods.” They were usually the product of a divine and human birth, or at least could trace their lineage back to a god as well as to other human beings. This age of heroes was the age when the great myths of ancient Greece were set, when “evil war and dread battle destroyed these [heroes], some under seven-gated Thebes in the land of Cadmus while they fought for the sake of Oedipus’s sheep, others brought in boats over the great gulf of the sea to Troy for the sake of fair-haired Helen.”<sup>7</sup> Death of course overtook them, but upon some of these heroes “Zeus the father, Cronus’ son, bestowed life and

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<sup>3</sup> Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 145-146.

<sup>4</sup> Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 176-178.

<sup>5</sup> Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 190-194.

<sup>6</sup> Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 158.

<sup>7</sup> Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 161-165.

habitations far from human beings and settled them at the limits of the earth; and these dwell with a spirit free of care on the Islands of the Blessed beside deep-eddying Ocean - happy heroes, for whom the grain-giving field bears honey-sweet fruit flourishing three times a year.”<sup>8</sup>

As is evident from Hesiod, heroes play an incredibly important and unique role in Greek religion. Greek myths take place in the age of heroes and they occupy the lone bright spot in the deterioration of humankind. Walter Burkert also notes that the class of heroes is a “peculiarity of Greek mythology and religion for which there are very few parallels.”<sup>9</sup> There were certainly no parallels in popularity. Sarah Iles Johnston writes that “myths that focused on heroes were far more popular in Greece than myths that focused on the gods - a rough estimate gives a three-to-one ratio.”<sup>10</sup> That is, for every three stories that focused on heroic exploits, just one focused on the gods themselves. By contrast, in Johnston’s survey of surrounding cultures in the ancient world, she “turned up approximately twenty-five ancient Near Eastern stories about heroes and more than thirty about the gods, giving us a ratio of five-to-six to set beside the roughly three-to-one ratio” calculated for the ancient Greeks.<sup>11</sup> The popularity of the stories then led to cultic worship, according to Burkert, writing that “the worship of heroes from the eighth century onwards must therefore be derived directly from the influence of the then flourishing epic poetry.”<sup>12</sup>

The popularity of heroes did not wane in the Hellenistic era, with Greek literature continuing a “celebration of a glorious past.”<sup>13</sup> In fact, the Hellenistic era continued to add to the

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<sup>8</sup> Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 167-173.

<sup>9</sup> Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, trans. John Raffan (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1985), 203.

<sup>10</sup> Sarah Iles Johnston, *The Story of Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 231.

<sup>11</sup> Johnston, *The Story of Myth*, 235.

<sup>12</sup> Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 204.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher P. Jones, *New Heroes in Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 66.

heroic ranks, as “cities heroized their sons for acting as ‘saviors’ and ‘founders’ either in battle or by diplomacy.”<sup>14</sup> Plutarch, for example, wrote that the souls of men have the opportunity to rise from men to heroes, and even to continue ascending up the ranks until they are numbered among the gods. He argued that “their souls, in accordance with nature and divine justice, ascend from men to heroes, from heroes to demi-gods, and from demi-gods, after they have been made pure and holy, as in the final rites of initiation, and have freed themselves from mortality and sense, to gods, not by civic law, but in very truth and according to right reason, thus achieving the fairest and most blessed consummation.”<sup>15</sup> Christopher Jones further notes that heroes were still of special importance during the reign of Hadrian, writing that “when he established the Panhellenion or league of ‘all Greeks,’ most of the cities that obtained admittance did so by proving that heroes were their founders, a process in which the claim that their leading families were of heroic descent must have had special weight.”<sup>16</sup> Going further in time than even Hadrian, the *Ethiopian Tale* of Heliodorus, dated in either the third or the fourth century C.E., “announces the Late Antique reverence for the heroes of classical myth, above all those of Homer.”<sup>17</sup> So Greek heroes were popular in the ancient world and sustained that popularity long past the time of Jesus.

Despite their popularity, coming up with a clear and precise definition for what constitutes a hero has proven to be somewhat difficult. This, in itself, tells us something of the importance of the category for the Greeks. Johnston notes that “as a class of humans, heroes were so important to the Greeks that the definitional boundaries were allowed to remain fluid;

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<sup>14</sup> Jones, *New Heroes in Antiquity*, 68.

<sup>15</sup> Plutarch, *Rom.* 28.8, trans. Bernadotte Perrin.

<sup>16</sup> Jones, *New Heroes in Antiquity*, 68.

<sup>17</sup> Jones, *New Heroes in Antiquity*, 73-74.

the Greeks preferred to be able to add to the ranks, now and then, someone who would help them if he received proper cult.”<sup>18</sup> Whereas the term began “to denote only the great legendary warriors of the past whose actions are remembered in song,” there was a desire to expand their number. “Now,” writes Maria Mirto, “in addition to the superhuman characters who lived in a time that is remembered as glorious and splendid (but a time that is past), local heroes, founders, and sovereigns of mythical dynasties in Greek cities appear beside the heroes of the great wars of Troy and Thebes.”<sup>19</sup> It was their importance, and the need to add to their ranks, that kept the definition loose. Even Johnston’s general statement is open to debate, however, as rather than a class of humans, Gunnell Ekroth sees heroes as “a category of divine beings of Greek mythology and religion which are difficult to define.”<sup>20</sup> Moyer Hubbard similarly defines heroes as “a class of semidivine beings, many of whom, particularly by the time of the Hellenistic era, were virtually indistinguishable from the gods.”<sup>21</sup> Heracles is perhaps the clearest example of this, described as a hero but also as a god, becoming fully divinized after death.<sup>22</sup> Dionysus provides another exception, existing as both a hero and a god. Johnston’s fuller statement defines heroes as “humans who either are born with or acquire status and abilities beyond that of normal humans, which they retain after death and can use to benefit the living humans who worship them.”<sup>23</sup> Walter Burkert’s definition is similar, writing that “the hero is a deceased person who exerts from his grave a power for good or evil and who demands appropriate honor.”<sup>24</sup> Simon

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<sup>18</sup> Johnston, *The Story of Myth*, 224.

<sup>19</sup> Maria Mirto, *Death in the Greek World*, trans. A. M. Osborne (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), 116.

<sup>20</sup> Gunnell Ekroth, “Heroes and Hero-Cults,” in *A Companion to Greek Religion*, ed. Daniel Ogden (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 100.

<sup>21</sup> Moyer Hubbard, “Greek Religion,” in *The World of the New Testament*, ed. Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 110.

<sup>22</sup> Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 208.

<sup>23</sup> Johnston, *The Story of Myth*, 220.

<sup>24</sup> Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 203.

Price states that heroes are “mortals who had died and who received cult at their tomb or at a specific sanctuary,”<sup>25</sup> and Robert Parker argues that “heroes were dead mortals believed by Greeks to have retained after death the power to influence human affairs, or at least to deserve continuing honor on a scale not accorded to the ordinary dead ... Heroes are biographically dead mortals, functionally minor gods.”<sup>26</sup> According to Christopher Wood,

For Homer, the ἥρως (*herōs*) was no mere mortal. Typically the offspring of a god and a mortal woman, he was expected to be fierce in battle and to adhere to a strict code of honor. Courageous and bold, he was typically endowed with some superhuman invulnerability that concealed an underlying great and tragic flaw, or *hamartia*, which served to be the source of his downfall. Hector’s *hubris*, Achilles’ anger, and Herakles’ madness are all perfect examples. Heroes often go where others fear to tread, battling horrific monsters, braving some far flung part of the world in order to not only secure some inner wisdom but also personal glory.<sup>27</sup>

The status and abilities they possess range widely, all the way from Perseus, a son of Zeus who encountered many strange creatures, traveled to the end of the world, and rescued a princess, to Eumaeus the swineherd, who was recognized as a hero simply for showing exceptional hospitality to Odysseus.

The category “hero” can stretch on special occasions even further to figures like Cleomedes, who was known for slaughtering sixty innocent children, but was still recognized as a “hero” after a miraculous disappearance.<sup>28</sup> As the story goes, the people attempted to stone him to death for his crime, but he ran to a temple of Athena and climbed into a chest. The chest was broken apart, and Cleomedes was nowhere to be found - his body had disappeared. This miraculous disappearance was later confirmed by the oracle at Delphi as indicating that he was a

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<sup>25</sup> Simon Price, *Religions of the Ancient Greeks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 19.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Parker, *On Greek Religion* (Ithaca: NY, Cornell University Press, 2011), 103-104, 110.

<sup>27</sup> Wood, *Heroes Masked and Mythic*, 7.

<sup>28</sup> Ekroth, “Heroes and Hero-Cults,” 104-105.



hero now, no longer a mere mortal. As Cleomedes illustrates, heroes do not always have to be persons of good character. So long as they are exceptional in some way, possessing “star quality, exceptionality, [and] newsworthiness,”<sup>29</sup> a heroic status is possible. For Cleomedes, it was his superhuman strength and the disappearance of his body. Some, like Mirto, have gone so far as to argue that “heroic mythology is generally a concoction of inhuman cruelty, crimes, and sexual excess.”<sup>30</sup> However, as Hesiod and others make clear, heroes were generally seen in a more positive light. According to Moyer Hubbard, they were seen as “mortals who had displayed great courage and accomplished remarkable feats in both their life and their death and so became immortal spirits upon death.”<sup>31</sup> Heracles can be said, as Wilfred Knox notes, to have gone “about the world as the benefactor of mankind, thus earning his claim to immortality.”<sup>32</sup> He earned his divine status through his heroism.

Ultimately, despite the definitional difficulties in the word hero, what distinguishes the gods from other beings like heroes is that they are deathless. Heroes are not - they without exception all die, even if they are subsequently elevated to divine status after death, such as Heracles. This is, according to classicist Gregory Nagy, “the most fundamental aspect [of the Hellenic hero]: that the hero must experience death. The hero’s death is the theme that gives him his power - not only in cult but also in poetry.”<sup>33</sup> Maria Mirto notes that “the distinguishing feature shared by all heroes is their place in the chthonian sphere: a constant involvement with death that sets them radically apart from the Olympian deities.”<sup>34</sup> By dying, they more closely

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<sup>29</sup> Parker, *On Greek Religion*, 104.

<sup>30</sup> Mirto, *Death in the Greek World*, 116.

<sup>31</sup> Hubbard, “Greek Religion,” 110.

<sup>32</sup> Wilfred L. Knox, “The ‘Divine Hero’ Christology in the New Testament,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 41, no. 4 (1948): 236.

<sup>33</sup> Gregory Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1999), 9.

<sup>34</sup> Minto, *Death in the Greek World*, 117.

resemble ordinary human beings. But their powers, character, or divine parentage set them apart as a distinguishable class from ordinary human beings. Burkert writes, “Whoever has died is not a god; whoever is honoured as [a hero] dwelling in his grave in the earth must have been a mortal - preferably, of course, a mortal from that greater, earlier age.”<sup>35</sup>

Despite dying, however, the hero remains active. Burkert notes that “a hero may physically encounter a person—a terrifying and dangerous occurrence.”<sup>36</sup> Herodotus notes in *Histories* 6.69 that the hero Astrabakos appears after death as a φάσμα to the wife of King Ariston, disguised as her husband. More often, however, the power of the hero was felt in the blessings or curses that befell the region. Heroes were worshiped like the gods for the benefits they were thought to provide, or to ward off more dangerous outcomes. For the people of the ancient world, “what mattered was not the hero as an idea but the hero as a power genuinely effective for good or ill.”<sup>37</sup> This is the motivation for venerating the hero even if the hero was not particularly good or noble. They could exert influence from beyond the grave, and so it was best to remain on good terms.

Robert Parker goes on to note that there are surely political implications to the hero cult as well, including elements like group solidarity or establishing territorial claims or bolstering one’s legitimacy to wield power. Mirto argues that “the rise of the hero cult was dependent on the *polis* and is instrumental in the consolidation of civic and political identity. This can be seen in the consecration of new heroes when historic city founders and colonizers were admitted to this category after their death.”<sup>38</sup> Parker, however, insists that “no political explanation of a hero

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<sup>35</sup> Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 205.

<sup>36</sup> Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 206.

<sup>37</sup> Parker, *On Greek Religion*, 116.

<sup>38</sup> Mirto, *Death in the Greek World*, 116.

cult will have much power that does not start from the experience of the worshiper who visited the shrine and, where it was not consumed in the flames, ate the sacrificial meat.”<sup>39</sup> What mattered most was the hero’s postmortem activity in the lives of the worshippers.

Because heroes, without exception, die, worship most often, but not always, is centered around the tomb of the hero and is more localized than worship of the pan-Hellenic deities. Again, an important exception here is Heracles, whose body was burned and therefore had no tomb, but was still worshiped as a hero, and as a god. In this way Heracles “is the greatest of the Greek heroes and yet thoroughly untypical: there is no grave of Heracles, and just as the stories about him are known everywhere, so his cult extends throughout the entire Greek world and far beyond.”<sup>40</sup> Another important exception is Asclepius. “Insofar as he was born the son of Apollo by a mortal woman, sired children, and died, he belongs among the heroes; and *heros* is what Pindar calls him,”<sup>41</sup> writes Burkert. However, “his grave plays no role in the cult, and he is eventually worshiped throughout the whole of Greece as a god.”<sup>42</sup> It is, therefore, a “well-known fact ... that not all hero cults took place at tombs.”<sup>43</sup> But the tomb was an ordinary place of worship, and most heroes were unknown outside of their particular home city or region.<sup>44</sup> These local heroes and their myths are “closely linked to the environment, monuments, ancient evidence, and somewhat distorted memories of a relatively recent past.”<sup>45</sup> During worship, both “gods and heroes are invoked in oaths, and prayers are addressed to them.”<sup>46</sup> Worship of the

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<sup>39</sup> Parker, *On Greek Religion*, 123.

<sup>40</sup> Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 208.

<sup>41</sup> Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 214.

<sup>42</sup> Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 214.

<sup>43</sup> Parker, *On Greek Religion*, 105.

<sup>44</sup> Hubbard, “Greek Religion,” 110.

<sup>45</sup> Mirto, *Death in the Greek World*, 122.

<sup>46</sup> Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 205.

heroes centered around “the cultic feast of the living in the company of, and in honour of, the hero,” which generally happened once a year.<sup>47</sup> Attempts have been made to distinguish between the worship offered to deities and that offered to heroes. However, these distinctions are generalizations, not hard and fast rules, and “by the Hellenistic era their cult and related worship often differed little from that of the gods.”<sup>48</sup>

The fact that heroes were mortal, like human beings, made them especially attractive as recipients of worship. Johnston notes that “as godlike entities who had once been mortal, they could be assumed to have more empathy for humans than the gods would have, and as former mortals who now had godlike powers, they could put that empathy to use.”<sup>49</sup> The gods in Homer are generally apathetic about the state of humanity as a whole. Individual gods will have certain heroes they favor, coming to their aid when needed, but outside of this limited circle of concern, they are uninvested. Furthermore, they were forever happy, deathless, without toil or pain or frustration. They never faced a real problem. The Divine in Greco-Roman philosophy was an even worse model for imitation - the source and ground of all being, the invisible, ineffable, unknowable Monad could not be imitated. But heroes know what it is like to suffer, to struggle against fate, and ultimately to die. They can relate to ordinary human beings in a way the gods never could, being deathless and living lives free from toil. For this reason the heroes are seen as “near at hand,” in contrast to the gods who are “remote.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 205.

<sup>48</sup> Hubbard, “Greek Religion,” 110.

<sup>49</sup> Johnston, *The Story of Myth*, 244-245.

<sup>50</sup> Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 207.

There are a number of characteristics shared by most heroes. This is not a binding checklist, as if to qualify as a hero one must check each and every one of these boxes. But these elements are typical. Johnston identifies ten of these typical items, writing that

the ideal hero [is] someone who (1) had a divine parent; (2) received help or advice from the gods; (3) relied upon help from a sibling or friend to accomplish at least some of his tasks; (4) used intellectual, as well as physical, skills to meet challenges; (5) was a good warrior; (6) founded cities; (7) established dynasties; (8) killed or conquered monsters; (9) journeyed to distant places, including Hades; and (10) remained active after his death.<sup>51</sup>

Among these ten traits, she highlights four as being of special importance: having a divine parent, conquering monsters, traveling to distant places (especially to the underworld), and remaining active after death.

Johnston notes that “relatively few heroes from other cultures have a divine parent. In the ancient Mediterranean, only Gilgamesh<sup>52</sup> is an exception (if we leave aside the Egyptian habit of formally declaring that all pharaohs were the sons of Ra.)”<sup>53</sup> In contrast, it is quite common for the ancient Greek heroes. Heracles has Zeus as his father, Achilles has Thetis as his mother, Asclepius has Apollo as a father, Aeneas has Aphrodite as his mother, Dionysus has Zeus as a father, Theseus has Poseidon as a father, and so on. According to Gregory J. Riley, “Zeus in fact fathers more than a hundred children by human women.”<sup>54</sup> Socrates remarks in Plato’s *Cratylus*, “Do you not know that the heroes are half gods (*hemitheoi*)? ... All to be sure were born when a God loved a mortal woman or a goddess loved a mortal man.”<sup>55</sup> Those who do not have direct divine parentage can sometimes trace their lineage back to a divine source in a grandparent or

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<sup>51</sup> Johnston, *The Story of Myth*, 239.

<sup>52</sup> While I have chosen specifically to focus on Greco-Roman heroes, the category can be expanded, if the researcher is so inclined, to encompass myths told in other cultures.

<sup>53</sup> Johnston, *The Story of Myth*, 239.

<sup>54</sup> Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*, 39.

<sup>55</sup> Plato, *Cratylus* 398c-d, translated by Gregory J. Riley in Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*, 39.

great-grandparent. Odysseus, for example, has human parents, but is the great-grandson of Hermes. So, “while not all, perhaps not even a majority, of the heroes of cult could boast a divine parent even when they unambiguously belonged to the mythological age,”<sup>56</sup> it was a very common theme.

Greek heroes were also monster killers and conquerors according to Johnston. She notes how peculiar this is, as in the “ancient Near East, there were quite a few stories about gods battling monsters ... [while] in Greek myths, in contrast, battles between gods and monsters are relatively rare.”<sup>57</sup> She can name only five, and one of those five, the battle of the gods against the *gigantes*, involves the help of Heracles.<sup>58</sup> In contrast to these five, there are innumerable exceptions of heroes fighting monsters. Johnston lists just a few:

Heracles killed the Nemean Lion, the Lernaean Hydra, the Stymphalian Birds, Geryon, Geryon’s dog Orthrus, and a Trojan sea monster, and he overcame (without killing them) the Erythmanthian Boar, the Cerynitian Deer, the Cretan Bull, the Mares of Diomedes, and Cerberus. Theseus conquered the Crommyonian Sow, the Bull of Marathon (who was formerly known as the Cretan Bull), and the Minotaur. Bellerophon killed the Chimaera. Perseus decapitated Medusa and killed a sea monster off the coast of Joppa. Oedipus drove the Sphinx to her death. Amphitryon killed the Teumessian Vixen - or some say that Oedipus killed her. Cadmus and Jason killed dragons. Odysseus outsmarted a Cyclops, evaded the Sirens, and at least stood his ground against Scylla.<sup>59</sup>

This partial list should make plain that, for the ancient Greeks, fighting monsters was an activity performed primarily by heroes, not by the gods themselves, although the heroes customarily receive divine help in the course of their battles.

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<sup>56</sup> Parker, *On Greek Religion*, 108.

<sup>57</sup> Johnston, *The Story of Myth*, 260, 261.

<sup>58</sup> Johnston, *The Story of Myth*, 261-263.

<sup>59</sup> Johnston, *The Story of Myth*, 270.

While “heroes from most cultures travel to distant places, ... few of them, outside of Greece, journey to the realm of the dead and return.”<sup>60</sup> Again, Gilgamesh is a prominent exception here. However, there are a number of characters in Greek mythology who make this journey, including Odysseus, Heracles, Theseus, and Orpheus.<sup>61</sup> The stories illustrate well how “Greek hero myths are about pushing the boundaries between human and divine.”<sup>62</sup>

The final trait she highlights, remaining active after death, underscores a point made earlier, that worship of the hero was closely correlated to the impact the hero could still have, whether to bless or to curse. Therefore, it is not enough to die a heroic death - the individual must remain active after death, not merely to intercede with the gods but to act of their own power and volition.

Gregory J. Riley, in addition to some of the traits listed above, offers an even more extensive list of characteristics usually shared by heroes. Heroes, thanks usually to their divine parentage, “took from the divine parent remarkable prowess or strength or beauty or wisdom.”<sup>63</sup> Asclepius had the power of healing thanks to his father Apollo, and Helen received her beauty as the child of Zeus.<sup>64</sup> Ordinary people who displayed extraordinary abilities sometimes came to be seen as heroes, and divine parentage ascribed to them, as Alexander the Great “was proclaimed to be the son of Ammon by the desert oracle of this major Egyptian god.”<sup>65</sup> Another example, in the period of Middle Platonism, saw Plato as “a hierophant who (according to an old legend) had been conceived by Apollo and born of the virgin Perictione.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Johnston, *The Story of Myth*, 242.

<sup>61</sup> It should be noted that Jesus would be depicted as having descended into Hell according to the creeds.

<sup>62</sup> Johnston, *The Story of Myth*, 243.

<sup>63</sup> Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*, 41.

<sup>64</sup> Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*, 41.

<sup>65</sup> Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*, 41.

<sup>66</sup> R. E. Witt, *Albinus and the History of Middle Platonism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937), 123.

Heroes also have what he calls “interwoven destinies,” meaning that “the destinies of individual heroes were seen as part of a larger plan determined by God for the rise and fall of whole peoples.”<sup>67</sup> In the *Iliad*, for example, the fate of the Greek and Trojan armies hinges entirely upon the decisions of individual heroes like Achilles and Hector. The Greeks cannot triumph without Achilles, and so his individual fate is tied together with the fate of the larger Greek army. These interwoven destinies are also entangled with fate. The hero “is often caught by fate, trapped or ensnared by something out of individual control, determined by higher powers.”<sup>68</sup> Perhaps the clearest example of this is Oedipus, destined to kill his father and marry his mother, despite his best attempts to escape fate. Heroes are subject to fate no less than regular human beings are, and much of the pathos of their stories come from their struggle with fate.

Heroes also have divine and human enemies. Achilles is opposed by the human ruler Agamemnon, as well as the god Apollo. Heracles earned the enmity of Hera even before he was born, and was forced to fulfill his twelve labors on account of the ruler of Argos, Eurystheus. Generally, “the hero is a subversive element, refusing to be subject to the unjust dictates of authority or in some way standing as a symbol of the abuse of power by the unrighteous.”<sup>69</sup>

One of the main characteristics of heroes, according to Riley, is facing a “critical situation that is the hero’s destiny and shows forth the true character of the soul. The problem set by the stories is really a framework to display the inner choices made and the integrity of the hero in the face of the injustices of life.”<sup>70</sup> The main story of the *Iliad*, for example, serves as a frame to display the character of Achilles, including his anger and hubris, the costs of these, his

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<sup>67</sup> Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*, 43.

<sup>68</sup> Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*, 44.

<sup>69</sup> Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*, 50.

<sup>70</sup> Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*, 51.



prowess in battle, and his ability to learn and grow, ending the story not by indulging his grief even further but returning the body of Hector to Priam. The hero's struggles not only show forth the character of the hero, but also serve as "bait in a trap," as other characters also reveal the quality of their souls by their response to the hero. The suitors are revealed for the terrible people they are by their response to Odysseus when he returns home in disguise. He is the trap, the one who tests their character, and they fail.

Heroes also often experience early death. This is, again, not a universal rule, but it is common. Every hero died - that was part of what made them a hero. It was also a fact of life for the hearers of these stories - very few people lived into old age in the ancient world.<sup>71</sup> But they receive the "prize of immortality,"<sup>72</sup> and go on to affect the lives of those still walking the earth.

Riley writes that

the death of the hero was an ironic victory. The hero fought the good fight and died, yet in some way won the battle with fate and the ambiguity of the gods. What remained after death was the right of the hero to stand on behalf of his or her worshipers who themselves passed the test. This was true because through death the hero became a transformed being.<sup>73</sup>

Heroes, therefore, were a constant presence in the Greco-Roman world, the foundation of the bulk of its mythology, and a center for religious veneration. While far from perfect, readers and listeners can profitably listen to their tales and learn from successes and their failures in the process of their moral education. Heroes exercised an influence in the lives of the people of the area, and importantly could relate to human beings in a way that the gods never could. They represent a "symbolic joining of the Olympian and the chthonic, which, in the Greek religious

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<sup>71</sup> Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*, 54-56.

<sup>72</sup> Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*, 56

<sup>73</sup> Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*, 58.

vision, are drastically opposed.”<sup>74</sup> And, I want to suggest, they provided a template for the story of Jesus, a hero who, in the mind of his worshippers, was superior in every way to other Greco-Roman heroes, in terms of power, in terms of morality, and in terms of providing a vision for life.

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<sup>74</sup> Mirto, *Death in the Greek World*, 125.

## *Chapter Two: Jesus the Literary Hero*

The listing of these heroic traits in the previous chapter may have already made it plain that there are remarkable similarities between Greco-Roman hero stories and the story of Jesus. Of the ten major traits listed by Johnston, Jesus in the Gospel of Mark arguably demonstrates eight of them. He fulfills most of Riley's criteria as well. In addition, every attempt at a definition given in the previous chapter for a hero is fulfilled by Jesus. Riley has sarcastically remarked, as quoted in the Introduction, "If one is not a New Testament scholar, one may see with little difficulty from the preceding [presentation] that stories of the life of Jesus were very much set in the mold of the stories of the ancient heroes."<sup>1</sup> Despite the glaring similarities, there has been very little written comparing the story of Jesus with the stories of Greco-Roman heroes. One suspects dogmatic prejudice is the root cause here, as the evidence for the parallels frankly leap off the page. I will draw out the parallels more explicitly below, but it is important to remember here that the goal is not to fulfill all of the criteria perfectly, as though the description given above were a checklist, and unless one checks each and every box, the person does not qualify as a hero. The hero story was a template, and it could be adapted, modified, and certain elements even dropped completely. In order for Jesus to qualify as a hero, one simply must be able to detect structural similarities in his story to other hero stories that are broad and compelling enough to say that a reader, or the writer, would have seen Jesus as a heroic figure. And if this can be established, it would be negligent on the part of New Testament scholarship not to compare the story of Jesus with stories like that of the *Iliad*. As a result of this feature however, readers should not expect a perfect correspondence between this chapter and the

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<sup>1</sup> Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*, 61.

previous one. There will be aspects of the heroic life laid out in chapter one that are not taken up here in chapter two. This is unavoidable without removing the complexities from the concept of a hero in chapter one. Being a hero is a flexible category, and while much of the material from the previous chapter is relevant and finds parallels in Mark's account of the Jesus story, one should not expect a perfect overlap. I did not want to simplify the description in chapter one and run the risk of being accused of overly streamlining the concept of a hero to make Jesus fit. What preceded this chapter was my best attempt at a fair and honest presentation of a Greco-Roman hero. Now I will do my best to draw out the similarities. It will be the task of the rest of the dissertation to interpret the differences.

### **The Parallels**

To start with perhaps the most obvious parallel, Jesus is defined by his relationship to death and his postmortem activity. This is despite the fact that, according to Collins, Mark “does not give a single, clear and precise explanation of why Jesus died. Even less does he give a single, logically clear and conceptually precise interpretation of Jesus’ death.”<sup>2</sup> These interpretive difficulties cannot overshadow the importance the death of Jesus has for Mark. Martin Kähler has famously stated that Mark's Gospel is a “passion narrative with an extended introduction.”<sup>3</sup> The Gospel is constructed to elevate the crucifixion and resurrection to central importance, with the whole of the narrative leading up to that moment. It would be a colossal failure on the part of the author if, as Collins suggests, Mark cannot explain why Jesus died. I would argue that Mark's narration of the death of Jesus makes perfect sense, and would have

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<sup>2</sup> Collins, *Mark*, 80.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ*, trans. Carl E. Braaten (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1988), 80n11.

made sense intuitively to early readers and listeners, when read as the story of the life and death of a hero.

Jesus's death is an early death, as is typical of hero stories. The death of Jesus is tied together with the gospel that Mark is trying to proclaim (Mark 14:8-9), which helps explain why it is foreshadowed as early as Mark 2:20, and the Pharisees and Herodians begin plotting to kill him as early as Mark 3:6.<sup>4</sup> Mark from the beginning tries to build "suspense and prepares for the narration of the arrest, suffering, and death of Jesus."<sup>5</sup> The climactic passion narrative is, according to Burton Mack, modeled after "the old wisdom tale of the wrongly accused righteous man," a story that can be "easily merged with the noble death pattern of the Greco-Roman martyrology."<sup>6</sup> That noble death pattern is rooted in the stories of Greco-Roman heroes. Gregory Riley goes so far as to argue that "if he had not been killed like one of the heroes, it would only have meant that he was not worthy of that status, that he was not a son of God, that he was not valuable enough to draw down on himself the jealousies of the gods or fate or the wrath of the powers and their religious authorities."<sup>7</sup> A vexing problem for New Testament studies, what to do with a crucified Messiah, makes complete sense if one sees in the Jesus story the story of a hero. It would have been odd if Jesus, as a heroic figure who must die a heroic death, had *not* been violently murdered! Jesus is also very clear throughout the Gospel that he will be quite active after his death, and the Gospel ends with the expectation of the imminent appearance of the risen Jesus. Jesus's postmortem activity will be conducted by him directly, not merely

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<sup>4</sup> Collins, *Mark*, 80.

<sup>5</sup> Collins, *Mark*, 210.

<sup>6</sup> Burton Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament?* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), 158.

<sup>7</sup> Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*, 91.

interceding with God as might be expected from an ordinary human being or a martyr. It is Jesus himself who will return on the clouds of heaven.

Jesus's death also serves as a test of his character. Jesus is depicted in Mark as genuinely fearing the crucifixion, and not wanting to suffer the painful ordeal set in front of him. But despite this fear, he refuses to give in to temptation, seeking only that God's will be done (Mark 14:35-36). He passes his test of character in a way no one else in the Gospel does, including the disciples, who choose to sleep at the crucial moment (Mark 14:37, 40, 41).

In this way, Jesus also serves the "bait in a trap" function. Other persons reveal their true character by how they respond to Jesus. Judas is shown to be a betrayer. Peter is shown to not have the courage he thought he did. And everyone who gives up things in this life for the sake of Jesus and the gospel, caring more for the state of their soul than their comfort here on earth, will receive a reward (Mark 10:29-31).

The Gospel opens by calling Jesus the "Son of God," a title he receives throughout the Gospel. Whether this means that divine parentage should be ascribed to Jesus in the Gospel of Mark is debatable. Jesus is referred to as "the Son of God" repeatedly throughout the Gospel, and called a Son by God directly in Mark 1:11, 9:7, and 15:39, although the tone of the centurion's proclamation in 15:39 is debated. One should not put too much stock in this, however, as "the title 'son of god' did not necessarily imply divine genealogy in either the Jewish or Greek worlds."<sup>8</sup> Psalm 2:7 contains almost identical language regarding Israel's king. Being called the Son of God, therefore, does not necessitate divine parentage, but merely someone who performed the will of God or who ruled over God's people. Adela Yarbro Collins argues that, since Mark alludes to Psalm 2, "when the Spirit enters into Jesus and he is addressed as God's

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<sup>8</sup> Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*, 74.

‘son,’ God thus appoints him as the messiah.”<sup>9</sup> However, Matthew and Luke, when they inherited the Gospel of Mark and sought to expand upon it, gave Jesus a virgin birth similar to that afforded to other Greco-Roman heroes. It is possible they saw in Mark a hero story and sought to bring out those elements even further, expanding the Jesus story from one that merely calls him God’s Son to one where he is, quite literally, God’s Son, in the same way that the heroes were children of the gods.

Interestingly, there is a Homeric connection in the baptism story in Mark, one that sets Jesus up as a divine figure. Collins argues that “the Spirit’s descent like a dove was modeled on Homer’s depiction of the descents of gods from the heavenly realm to earth. In the Homeric epics, such descents are described with similes involving the descent of birds.”<sup>10</sup> The examples of this phenomenon are too numerous to count. For this reason, “members of the audience familiar with Greek mythology would understand v. 10 to mean that the earthly Jesus, from the time of his baptism, was a divine being walking the earth.”<sup>11</sup> This connection, besides the parallels to Homeric gods, also bolsters another one of Johnston’s criteria, that heroes receive help from the gods, and strengthens another of Riley’s parallels, that the hero is endowed by the gods with extraordinary abilities surpassing those of regular persons. Jesus will demonstrate those abilities throughout the rest of the narrative. This primarily takes the form of miraculous healings, but “Jesus could have done anything, apparently,” getting even the wind and the sea to obey him (Mark 4:41).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Collins, *Mark*, 150.

<sup>10</sup> Collins, *Mark*, 149.

<sup>11</sup> Collins, *Mark*, 149.

<sup>12</sup> Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*, 80.

Johnston's sixth and seventh criteria are that heroes often found cities and establish dynasties, and this seems to be true in a unique way of the Jesus story. The very first words of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark are: "The time has been fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has drawn near. Repent and trust in the good news" (Mark 1:15). The message of Jesus is centered around the Kingdom of God, which has drawn near in his life and through his ministry. Jesus has come not merely to found a city, but to establish a foothold for the Kingdom of God upon the earth. He does this by enacting its arrival in his ministry, along with the establishment of a "dynasty" of fellow apostles commissioned to do the same thing. Of course, Jesus's Kingdom is unique, and so Mark's telling of its inauguration "utilizes a narrative strategy that consistently frustrates the equation between epiphany and victorious holy war," with Jesus both revealing the Kingdom while consistently undermining "the triumphalistic eschatological expectations of Jewish nationalism."<sup>13</sup> So while Jesus's founding activity looks very different from what can be seen from a figure like Heracles, it is nonetheless there and an indispensable part of his story.

Johnston's fourth criterion, that the hero use intellectual skills as well as physical prowess to overcome challenges is fulfilled at least partially in the Jesus story, with Jesus shown outsmarting his opponents in demonstrating the truth and the power of his Kingdom at every opportunity. While Jesus does not physically subdue any opponents, his body and garments do possess power, as can be seen in the story of the hemorrhaging woman in Mark 5:25-34.

Johnston's fifth and eighth criteria are that heroes be good warriors and kill or conquer monsters. This applies to Jesus quite well if one takes into account Jesus' supernatural opposition. Mark shows Jesus from the very beginning of his ministry to be locked in opposition to Satan. Jesus explains early in this Gospel that "no one is ever able, having entered into the

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<sup>13</sup> Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 131.



house of a strong man, to plunder his goods, unless first he bound the strong man. And then he will plunder his house” (Mark 3:27). This saying, with the strong man being a reference to Satan, suggests that the Markan Jesus sees himself as in a battle with Satanic forces, and he is himself rescuing “goods” that the strong man has taken, having bound him up and made him powerless. He makes this explicit later in the Gospel, where he says he gives his life as a “ransom for many,” with the word used for ransom, λύτρον, a reference to the price required to manumit a slave. Paul thinks in a similar way, writing that Jesus “gave himself on behalf of our sins, so that he may remove us out of the present evil age” (Gal 1:4), and the same logic is seen in Mark. This world is under the control of hostile, demonic forces, and Jesus is launching a battle to save those trapped under this evil dominion by binding the strong man and ransoming those held captive. Jesus’s “kingdom and weapons are spiritual ones, and he does not choose to fight by other means.”<sup>14</sup> So while Jesus is not a warrior in the typical sense, his whole ministry is cast as a battle, with Jesus leading the fight. Additionally, if one follows Dennis MacDonald in seeing the story of Jesus and the Gerasene demoniac as modeled after the story of Odysseus and Polyphemus, then Jesus quite literally is depicted as fighting a monster, and much more successfully than Odysseus.<sup>15</sup>

The similarities between Jesus and Greco-Roman heroes have received scant attention, but they have been noticed by some. To take one example, in an interesting article by Wilfred L. Knox, he argues that Paul’s Christology “described Jesus in terms which represented Him in very much the same light as some of the most popular cult-figures of the hellenistic world, an active deity who was partly human and partly divine.”<sup>16</sup> This is a reference to heroes as ἡμίθεοι.

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<sup>14</sup> Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*, 80.

<sup>15</sup> MacDonald expounds on this in several places, although nowhere better than in Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Gospels and Homer* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 212-221.

<sup>16</sup> Knox, “The ‘Divine Hero’ Christology in the New Testament,” 231.

These heroes “had lived on earth and earned their immortality by the services they had rendered to mankind.”<sup>17</sup> He further notes that Heracles was “the most prominent in the tradition of popular philosophy. Since the time of Antisthenes, Cynics had regarded him as the type of the missionary philosopher who goes up and down the world, saving men from vice and ignorance ... His life of service was ended by a tragic death; but the apparent tragedy was reversed by his exaltation to the rank of the Olympian gods.”<sup>18</sup> Heracles must “earn his godhead by the service of men,”<sup>19</sup> despite his divine origin. Through death Heracles realized the “full attainment to perfection.”<sup>20</sup> All of this has remarkable parallels in the language of Paul, particularly in Philippians 2:8-11. Knox takes pains to insist that he is not claiming the story of Heracles directly influenced the Gospels, and he is even unwilling to insist that Paul had a knowledge of Greek literature “beyond a collection of extracts designed as propaganda for Judaism,”<sup>21</sup> only that “the language of the christological passages ... show a close affinity with the descriptions and panegyrics of these figures of the pagan world, of whom Heracles was the most prominent.”<sup>22</sup> There is, he writes, “an affinity between Jewish-Christian and pagan language which can hardly be due to chance.”<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, one of the biggest differences between Jesus and other heroes that he finds, the belief in his pre-existence, does not apply in the case of the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, or Luke. Furthermore, he argues that while there is a connection between Jesus and the “Jewish conception of the martyr as one who is made perfect by his sufferings in 4 Maccabees,” this Jewish tradition itself “goes back to an earlier pagan one, preserved by Philo, which traces the

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<sup>17</sup> Knox, “The ‘Divine Hero’ Christology in the New Testament,” 231.

<sup>18</sup> Knox, “The ‘Divine Hero’ Christology in the New Testament,” 232.

<sup>19</sup> Knox, “The ‘Divine Hero’ Christology in the New Testament,” 236.

<sup>20</sup> Knox, “The ‘Divine Hero’ Christology in the New Testament,” 232.

<sup>21</sup> Knox, “The ‘Divine Hero’ Christology in the New Testament,” 241.

<sup>22</sup> Knox, “The ‘Divine Hero’ Christology in the New Testament,” 233.

<sup>23</sup> Knox, “The ‘Divine Hero’ Christology in the New Testament,” 233.

courage of the philosopher under torture back to Heracles, the head of the pagan roll of the upholders of justice and liberty.”<sup>24</sup> So even the partial parallels to Jewish martyrs can be held, in Knox’s view, to be ultimately rooted in ideas that go back to a heroic figure like Heracles.

### **Composing a Hero Story**

Understanding the story of Jesus as a Greco-Roman hero story provides readers with an additional amount of interpretative leverage. It tells us how the story is to be read, specifically as an attempt to portray Jesus as being superior to, more courageous, and more compassionate than his Greco-Roman counterparts. This way of understanding the Gospel of Mark goes against conventional understandings of the Evangelist as a mere faithful recorder of oral traditions about Jesus, either sayings passed down that are traceable to the historical Jesus or of traditions created by the communities that formed in the early days of the Jesus movement. The Evangelists become passive scribes, there to put the pieces of oral tradition together in a manuscript, and not much more. To the extent they have an editorial bent, it reflects the specific interests of that particular Christian community. The goal of scholarship then becomes seeing through the Gospels to the more primitive and foundational oral traditions underneath and reconstructing an idea of the Christian community behind the text. The creativity and originality of the actual writer is minimized. This approach to the text discourages one from seeing or acknowledging these parallels between Jesus and other Greco-Roman heroes, as seeing the story of Jesus as a hero story suggests the work of an author who shaped the narrative in a particular direction. It requires readers to shift their mindsets when analyzing the text from seeing within it a recording of oral traditions passed down from the historical Jesus to a mindset which sees this as a work of

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<sup>24</sup> Knox, “The ‘Divine Hero’ Christology in the New Testament,” 245-246. The reference to 4 Maccabees is to 4 Maccabees 7:15.

rhetorical composition, full of creativity and authorial direction. If this mindset is not dealt with at the beginning, my fear is that the larger argument will not receive a fair hearing. So before beginning, I will lay out my approach to the Gospel of Mark and why looking at Greco-Roman literature is not a distraction but an integral part of Mark's context.

Conventional approaches to the Gospel of Mark ground it in oral tradition passed on from the earliest days of the Jesus movement, with some of the sayings potentially going back to Jesus himself. Sarah Ruden, in a recent translation of the Gospels, notes that "Mark might have been based mainly or only on oral narratives."<sup>25</sup> The Jesus Seminar was an attempt by the Westar Institute and its fellows to sift through the accumulated sayings in the Gospels and determine each one's provenance in the oral tradition, how likely any particular saying is to have originated with the historical Jesus, with the history of the early Church, or to be an evangelist's creation. The teachings of Jesus and his original apostles were passed along from person to person, and only the most important or unique sayings of Jesus were likely to be remembered, including the sayings most relevant for the life of the Markan community. In this process of transmission, new sayings would have been created, or mistakes would have entered into the telling, so what we have is not an unvarnished record of the sayings of Jesus, but through form criticism and redaction criticism we are able to get closer to the original oral tradition and thereby closer to the words of Jesus himself. Scholars differ on how faithfully these oral traditions were preserved. Some scholars emphasize the creative activity of the early Church, and "conclude that [the Gospels] tell us much more about those communities than about Jesus," whereas others "suppose that the communities that handed on the traditions were careful to preserve them, not without adaptation and interpretation, but broadly with faithfulness to the form in which they received

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<sup>25</sup> Sarah Ruden, *The Gospels* (New York: Modern Library, 2021), xvii.

them.”<sup>26</sup> The foremost competing analysis comes from more conservative scholarship, which argues that this transmission process was not long at all, and that the “Evangelists were in more or less direct contact with eyewitnesses, not removed from them by a long process of anonymous transmission of the traditions.”<sup>27</sup> The Gospels, in this view, record eyewitness testimony as reliably as possible, and so the Gospel accounts can be taken as historical accounts preserving eyewitness testimony.

In either understanding of the Gospel’s origin however, the author of Mark is not so much an independent author as a community scribe. He did not compose his story but faithfully sought to record and transmit the teachings and theological inclinations of the Markan community, or the original eyewitnesses, in an organized, compelling way. The same is true for the authors of the Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John. All were part of a larger Matthean, Markan, Lukan, or Johannine community and their Gospels reflect the theological diversity of the early Christian movement. Interestingly, our only source for these communities are the Gospels themselves, since no other evidence of their existence has survived.

Furthermore, the obvious interest in Jewish teachings in the Gospel of Mark, even when those teachings come in for criticism, would make this originating community a Jewish one. They are one group participating in a larger debate about what Judaism should look like following the crucifixion of Jesus and the destruction of the Temple. In this conception, the Gospel of Mark is a Jewish document, written by a Jewish community, about a Jewish teacher, with twelve Jewish apostles, addressing Jewish concerns. There is no real reason, in this understanding, to seek out Greco-Roman parallels. That takes one outside the Gospel’s original

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<sup>26</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 196.

<sup>27</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 13.

context. Consequently, parallels with Greco-Roman literature receive scant attention in the secondary literature, even as attention is lavished on possible “echoes” of other Jewish writings found within the Gospels.

There are other reasons for this hyper-focus on the Jewish context of the Gospels. In a post-Shoah world, the recognition that Christian language about Judaism and the Jewish people had created an environment for genocide on a massive scale forced a reckoning. Endeavoring to shed this anti-Jewish bias, scholars have sought to highlight the Jewish roots of Christianity. This is a laudable motivation and should be applauded. Nothing I say in what follows should be seen as an attempt to revert to the previous anti-semitism that ran rampant in the Christian world for far too long.

Additionally, a hidden theological bias seems to be at work. Christianity prides itself on being a “revealed” religion. That is, it is grounded in the revelation of God given in the person of Jesus Christ in fulfillment of God’s larger plan of salvation rooted in the story of Israel. The nation of Israel itself received revelation from God and predicted, through prophecy, the coming of Christ. There is a line, a story, and a history that runs all the way from Genesis to Revelation, all grounded in a direct revelation from God. Academic understandings of Christian origins that anchor it in Judaism are quite amenable to this understanding. Christianity, if rooted solely in Judaism, maintains its status as a revealed religion. This understanding is potentially uprooted, however, if it turns out Christianity is syncretistic, with teachings that come not directly from God or the Jewish people but from outside those sources, from pagans and the surrounding culture. If it turns out the Gospels are rooted not just in Judaism but also in Plato or Homer, then Christianity may be, depending on the amount of theological creativity one is comfortable with, something other than a direct revelation from God, passed down unchangeably from person to

person to the modern day. It is easier, theologically speaking, if one finds all of Christianity's formative influences within the Hebrew Bible and from absolutely nowhere else. One can see this tendency in the work of N.T. Wright, who recently came under criticism from Stephen L. Young. Young summarized Wright's position succinctly:

Wright instead opts for a generalizing approach: since Paul “remains a traditional Jew,” he would have “a specifically Jewish worldview” and think with a “robust version of the Jewish monotheistic doctrine of creation.” He would have understood reality through his Jewish “sense of a narrative” of God's rescuing of Israel ... So, when it comes to any topic Wright regards as Jewish, Paul can interface with it in ways that follow Wright's own ideas about ancient Judaism. But when it comes to Greco-Roman philosophy, Wright's repetition of his own large-scale frameworks sets the expectation of “radical change,” “revolution,” “rethinking around Jesus himself,” and living “counter-culturally, being radically different from those around” ... In Judaism-versus-Hellenism logic, the New Testament only derives substantive influence from Judaism and not wider Greek and Roman culture. Most scholars now reject this dichotomy. But its well-worn paths, plus the paradigms of influence and borrowing, continue to structure much of the background logic of biblical studies.<sup>28</sup>

There are fatal flaws in this desire to ignore the Greco-Roman world in favor of looking exclusively at Jewish sources. Despite Tertullian's famous question, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?,” Judaism in the first century was itself heavily influenced by the Greco-Roman world. Bart Ehrman argues that “notwithstanding the caricatures that one sometimes reads, in which Judaism is said to have been absolutely unique and unlike other Greco-Roman religions, most people in the ancient world recognized it to be an ancient form of cultic devotion similar to others in many ways.”<sup>29</sup> Judaism in the Hellenistic world is described as a Greco-Roman religion in his famous textbook. Lee I. Levine argues that “contact between Jews and the outside world was ongoing, often intensive. Jews, like other peoples throughout the East, could in no way

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<sup>28</sup> Stephen L. Young, “So Radically Jewish that He's an Evangelical Christian,” *Interpretation*, 76(4), 2022, 339-351.

<sup>29</sup> Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 7th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 50.

remain oblivious to the cultural and social as well as the political and economic forces at work throughout the Empire.”<sup>30</sup> This is because, as Erich Gruen notes:

for the Jews of antiquity who grew up in the Greek-speaking world of the Mediterranean, especially those in the Diaspora (where the vast majority of Jews lived), and, to a significant degree, even those in Palestine, Hellenic culture was no alien entity to which adjustment was necessary but a significant part of their own lives. That culture need not represent a dilution of their traditions but could serve as a mode whereby they expressed them.<sup>31</sup>

The Hellenistic world was simply the given environment for the overwhelming majority of Jewish persons, and the culture within which they learned to express their ideas and live out their religious traditions.

Philo is perhaps the best example of a Jewish author who was heavily influenced by Greek philosophy and utilized it to express his understanding of the Hebrew Bible. Philo “directed [his efforts] toward demonstrating the total harmony between Jewish and Greek concepts and values.”<sup>32</sup> Any understanding of Philo is going to be woefully lacking if Plato is not taken into consideration. No one would think of saying that “Philo is Jewish, therefore there is no need to consider Greco-Roman sources.” But this is exactly what too many have done to Jesus. He is Jewish, and therefore we find his sources of inspiration solely in Jewish texts.

And Philo is not alone. Gruen goes on to note that “a host of imaginative writings, whether the recasting of biblical stories, adaptation of Greek genres, or creation of historical novels attest to the Jewish construction of links to the non-Jewish world.”<sup>33</sup> He goes on to highlight the work of Artapanus, who rewrote the stories of Genesis and Exodus and made Moses “responsible for inventing ships and weapons, for hydraulic and building devices, and for

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<sup>30</sup> Lee I. Levine, *Judaism and Hellenism in Antiquity* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1998), 181.

<sup>31</sup> Erich S. Gruen, *The Construct of Identity in Hellenistic Judaism* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 114-115.

<sup>32</sup> Levine, *Judaism and Hellenism in Antiquity*, 30.

<sup>33</sup> Gruen, *The Construct of Identity in Hellenistic Judaism*, 117.



the introduction of philosophy”<sup>34</sup> in Egypt. In fact, he argues “there was little in Egyptian society or experience that could not be traced to Moses.”<sup>35</sup> While some of this appears intended to be “jocular,” there is a promotion of cross-cultural integration here. Indeed, despite the story told in 1 Maccabees of rebellion, or the “deep suspicion and hostility to the surrounding world” reflected in 3 Maccabees, “such works appear to have been in the distinct minority.”<sup>36</sup> Others such as Aristobulus “claimed that Greek civilization had its source in Jewish tradition, as Greek philosophers such as Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle had drawn their inspiration from the Hebrew Bible.”<sup>37</sup> Far from being at war with Greek philosophy or civilization, Jewish individuals like Aristobulus claimed Judaism invented these things! This does not mean that these Jewish persons abandoned their ethnic or religious identity, but merely that they were quite open to other influences as well, either consciously or unconsciously.

While reactions to Hellenization varied, no one was unaffected by it. As Martin Hengel notes, “from about the middle of the third century BC *all Judaism* must really be designated ‘*Hellenistic Judaism*’ in the strict sense.”<sup>38</sup> No form of Judaism entirely escaped Hellenistic influence - even those that most rebelled against it were themselves formed by that rebellion. Hellenism and the Greek language had thoroughly enveloped not only diaspora communities but even Palestine, which “make[s] the differentiation between ‘Palestinian’ and ‘Hellenistic’ Judaism, which is one of the fundamental heuristic principles of New Testament scholarship, much more difficult; indeed, on the whole it proves to be no longer adequate.”<sup>39</sup> Certainly

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<sup>34</sup> Gruen, *The Construct of Identity in Hellenistic Judaism*, 120.

<sup>35</sup> Gruen, *The Construct of Identity in Hellenistic Judaism*, 120.

<sup>36</sup> Levine, *Judaism and Hellenism in Antiquity*, 25.

<sup>37</sup> Levine, *Judaism and Hellenism in Antiquity*, 25.

<sup>38</sup> Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1974), 104.

<sup>39</sup> Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 105.

tension between more conservative groups and accommodationist factions increased after the Maccabean revolt, but “*Hellenistic ... influence* was effective even where foreign ‘wisdom’ was most bitterly repudiated,” thereby confirming that “*even Palestinian Judaism must be regarded as Hellenistic Judaism.*”<sup>40</sup>

The Hellenistic influence on the kinds of Judaism practiced in Galilee is arguably even greater than it would have been in Jerusalem. Isaiah calls this region “Galilee of the Gentiles” (Isaiah 8:23, 9:1), as it was largely Gentile in population, and Gregory Riley notes that in 1 Maccabees, Simon, the brother of the leader of the Jewish faction in Judea, sends soldiers to “rescue” the Jews in Galilee, and “he took the Jews of Galilee ... with their wives and children and all they possessed, and led them to Judea with great rejoicing” (1 Macc 5:21-23). This text is obviously an exaggeration, as there were certainly Jews left in Galilee. One way of reading this text, suggested by Riley, is that “the Jews who agreed with Judea and Jerusalem left with Simon, leaving behind the Jews who did not, who felt more at home in Galilee. These ‘left behind’ Jews were perhaps not even considered real Jews by Simon, as the story seems to imply.”<sup>41</sup> Many of the major cities in Galilee were Gentile cities, and “a number were named after the Gentile rulers of the empire in Rome: we have the cities Tiberias, Caesarea Philippi, Ptolemais, and Livia.”<sup>42</sup> There was simply no way to live in Galilee apart from Hellenistic influence.

The tendency to ignore this and treat Judaism as a bounded entity with strict borders is exacerbated by the way our seminaries are structured, where the only preparation one gets for classes on the New Testament is a class on the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible. But that fails to do justice to the historical data we have on Judaism in the Hellenistic world. So one is frankly

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<sup>40</sup> Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 252.

<sup>41</sup> Gregory J. Riley, “What Has Galilee to Do with Jerusalem?,” in *Christian Origins and the New Testament in the Greco-Roman Context*, ed. Margaret Froelich et al. (Claremont, CA: Claremont Press, 2016), 43.

<sup>42</sup> Riley, “What Has Galilee to Do with Jerusalem?,” 42.

obligated as a scholar to look at the influence of the Hellenistic world upon the Gospels, even when they are taken to be thoroughly Jewish documents, as Judaism itself was affected by Hellenization. Jesus and the author of the Gospel of Mark can be Jewish, and we still need to account for Greco-Roman influences.

### **Questioning the Conventional Account**

The picture becomes even clearer, however, when one approaches the Gospel of Mark slightly differently, an approach that sticks even closer to the evidence we actually possess. What we have in the Gospel of Mark is, to state the obvious, a written text. Someone in the ancient world constructed this Gospel and wrote it down. And this is not just any text, like a bill of sale or a list of some kind. The Gospel of Mark possesses a reasonably high level of sophistication. While not rivaling authors like Homer or Vergil in literary erudition, it tells a coherent, interesting story packed with theological depth, utilizes literary tools like similes, metaphors, and allusions, engages in some of the critical debates of its day, as well as interacting with other pieces of writing such as the Septuagint.

This seemingly basic fact is worth lingering upon, as not just anyone could put together a text like this, for “writing was a specialist’s activity.”<sup>43</sup> As Robyn Faith Walsh notes, “while one might be trained in certain scribal practices or memorization techniques, the ability to compose ‘original’ poetry or prose required an advanced rhetorical education.”<sup>44</sup> She highlights as an example Seneca, who references a certain Calvisius Sabinus in his *Epistles* 3.27.5, “who had bought high priced slaves trained to be living books: each one had learned one classical author

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<sup>43</sup> Robyn Faith Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 109.

<sup>44</sup> Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature*, 109.

by heart - Homer, Hesiod, or the Lyrics - and had the suitable quotations ready at the disposal of their forgetful master during the banquet conversations.” Martin Hengel notes that “the Hellenistic period was a period of education ... a ‘civilization of *paideia*.’”<sup>45</sup> Education was the distinguishing mark of being a full-fledged member of the Hellenistic world, with Isocrates stating that “the designation ‘Hellene’ seems no longer to be a matter of descent but of disposition, and those who share in our education have more right to be called Hellenes than those who have a common descent with us.”<sup>46</sup> M. Launey once remarked, regarding the Greek gymnasium, “il n’existe ... pas d’institution plus typiquement grecque.”<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, “Greek education ... hardly changed from the beginning of the Hellenistic age,” and “educated the young ‘Hellenes’ in a very uniform way.”<sup>48</sup> Despite the importance of education, given the lack of publicly funded schools, “the majority of Romans were not instructed beyond a very basic literacy, if at all.”<sup>49</sup> Walsh writes, “It is estimated that less than 20 percent of the Roman Empire was literate, and, when considered alongside the technical procedures for producing literature, this estimate may be generous.”<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, most of those would have been trained to be literate to the extent necessary to perform their profession, but not any further. One can be confident, therefore, that the author of the Gospel of Mark was part of a small group who possessed an advanced rhetorical education that could compose a full narrative story. It defies credulity to assume we would possess this written text unless that was the case.

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<sup>45</sup> Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 65.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 65.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 65.

<sup>48</sup> Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 67.

<sup>49</sup> Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature*, 115.

<sup>50</sup> Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature*, 116.

As a writer with an advanced rhetorical education, the author of Mark would have participated in the kinds of practices that were standard for writers possessing this kind of advanced education, as “any act of writing requires a certain institutional structure, training, and other ‘social conditions,’ both to legitimize and to support the specialists involved.”<sup>51</sup> We can learn more about the composition of Mark, therefore, by looking at how he would have been trained. After obtaining a basic knowledge of Greek, “a pupil would be ready for more sophisticated rhetorical training - namely, beginning to read Greek texts with a *grammiticus*.”<sup>52</sup> Students would be trained in recitation and word study, most likely with Homer. A. A. Long has written that:

Homer was *the* poet for the Greeks. Children learned large parts of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* by heart as part of their primary education. All Greek literature and art, and just about all Greek philosophy, resonate against the background of Homer. Throughout classical antiquity and well into the Roman Empire, Homer held a position in Mediterranean culture that can only be compared with the position the Bible would later occupy.<sup>53</sup>

Martin Hengel states that early literary education was focused “on one - it might almost be called the canonical - book, the epic work of Homer, especially the *Iliad*.”<sup>54</sup> This “constant reading of Homer kept alive knowledge of Greek mythology.”<sup>55</sup> Karl Sandnes has noted that “from the very beginning of elementary teaching, the boys were familiarized with the names of the gods, the heroes, their genealogies, and their actions in the war against Troy ... This knowledge was conveyed to the boys in basic teaching which brings to mind the question-and-answer style so typical of later Christian catechisms.”<sup>56</sup> Quintilian has written that it is “an admirable practice,

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<sup>51</sup> Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature*, 113.

<sup>52</sup> Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature*, 117.

<sup>53</sup> A. A. Long, “Stoic Readings of Homer” in *Homer’s Ancient Readers*, ed. Robert Lamberton and John J. Keaney (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 44.

<sup>54</sup> Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 66.

<sup>55</sup> Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 67.

<sup>56</sup> Karl Sandnes, *The Challenge of Homer* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2009), 52.

which now prevails, to begin by reading Homer and Virgil, although the intelligence needs to be further developed for the full appreciation of their merit: but there is plenty of time for that since the boy will read them more than once. In the meantime let his mind be lifted by the sublimity of heroic verse, inspired by the greatness of its theme and imbued with the loftiest sentiments” (Quintilian, *Inst* 1.8.5).<sup>57</sup> Quintilian could be confident the children would encounter Homer multiple times throughout the course of their education because no one ever graduates from reading Homer. Heraclitus remarks

From the very first age of life, the foolishness of infants just beginning to learn is nurtured on the teaching given in [Homer’s] school. One might almost say that his poems are our baby clothes, and we nourish our minds by draughts of his milk. He stands at our side as we each grow up and shares our youth as we gradually come to manhood; when we are mature, his presence within us is at its prime; and even in old age, we never weary of him. When we stop, we thirst to begin him again. In a word, the only end of Homer for human beings is the end of life. (*Homeric Problems* 1.5-7)<sup>58</sup>

Karl Olav Sandnes notes that “Homer’s writings are not left behind or superseded. Progress in education includes his poems at every stage from learning penmanship to composing rhetorical speeches.”<sup>59</sup>

Even at this stage of a writer’s advanced rhetorical education, working with a *grammaticus*, “a boy might still find considerable difficulty writing formal Greek, and his ability to read and comprehend Greek literature would probably be limited to Homer, to classical Attic prose, and to such poetry as he had been taught.”<sup>60</sup> More education “under a notable philosopher, rhetorical specialist, or in some cases in later antiquity, a rabbi”<sup>61</sup> would be required to compose

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<sup>57</sup> Sandnes, *The Challenge of Homer*, 30-31.

<sup>58</sup> Heraclitus, *Homeric Problems*, ed. and trans. Donald A. Russell and David Konstan (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), quoted in Sandnes, *The Challenge of Homer*, 56.

<sup>59</sup> Sandnes, *The Challenge of Homer*, 56.

<sup>60</sup> Elaine Fantham, *Roman Literary Culture*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2013), 30-31.

<sup>61</sup> Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature*, 118.

original works. The capacity to do this, however, depended greatly on an individual's "financial and intellectual capacity."<sup>62</sup> This meant that "very few" progressed further.<sup>63</sup> Walsh writes, "Judeans who wished to continue with higher education would attend study houses like the kind described by Cicero and Plutarch where they would train with Greek and Roman texts in addition to the Torah."<sup>64</sup> The additional training with Greek and Roman texts was "a necessity for anyone who pursued advanced literacy in the Roman period regardless of ethnic association."<sup>65</sup> Philo, for example, "took it for granted that well-to-do Jews would be educated at the gymnasium."<sup>66</sup>

After this period of advanced education was complete and a writer was able to try composition for themselves, they would have done so with literary models in mind. This composition with literary models was "the dominant notion in the literary aesthetic of Roman Greece," and was called "mimēsis, a complex term that covers both 'artistic representation' and 'imitation' of predecessors."<sup>67</sup> M. Fabius Quintilianus in the *Institutio oratoria* notes, "In everything which we teach models are more effective even than the general principles that are handed down, so long as the student has reached a stage when he can appreciate such models without the assistance of a teacher, and can rely on his own powers to imitate them" (10.1.15).<sup>68</sup> The art of composition was taught in such a way that a writer had models of other great pieces of writing in mind and sought to emulate what had been done in the past, striving to improve upon it or adjust certain elements to make their work unique. The ancient world "practiced model

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<sup>62</sup> Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 69.

<sup>63</sup> Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 69.

<sup>64</sup> Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature*, 118-119.

<sup>65</sup> Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature*, 119.

<sup>66</sup> Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 68.

<sup>67</sup> Tim Whitmarsh, *Greek Literature and the Roman Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 26-27.

<sup>68</sup> MacDonald, *The Gospels and Homer*, 4.

criticism” as opposed to “genre criticism.”<sup>69</sup> Rather than deciding on a genre and then imbuing the piece of writing with elements characteristic of that genre, the ancient world composed by reference to model antetexts. Quintilian says that “there can be no doubt that in art no small portion of our task lies in imitation, since, although invention came first and is all-important, it is expedient to imitate whatever has been invented with success. And it is a universal rule of life that we should wish to copy what we approve in others” (10.2.1-2). Invention is the process of deciding what one wants to say, whereas imitation works off of an existing text to help provide structure to the piece of writing. One way imitation was done was “by borrowing admirable traits from several models, what one might call eclectic emulation.”<sup>70</sup> When one practiced the art of imitation, one sought “not simply a xerographic reproduction but also ... a transformation.”<sup>71</sup> It was commonplace in this era that “points of reference (like a character’s manner of death) might be borrowed from another writer and elaborated upon; imaginative school exercises like *imitatio*, *aemulatio*, or *suasoriae* (declamation) lent themselves to writers creatively supplementing accounts of well-known figures or subjects.”<sup>72</sup> Even in early Christian literature like the Gospels, one would expect to find writers engaging prior literary models and structuring their composition around such models.

Students would saturate themselves in important literary models they could use for their imitations. The model must be read and re-read until they are so familiar with the work they can imitate it from memory. Writers should also not just imitate one text at a time, but several. Quintilian argues that “we shall do well to keep a number of different excellences before our

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<sup>69</sup> Thomas G. Rosenmeyer, “Ancient Literary Genres: A Mirage?” in Andrew Laird (ed.), *Ancient Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 435.

<sup>70</sup> MacDonald, *The Gospels and Homer*, 4.

<sup>71</sup> Whitmarsh, *Greek Literature and the Roman Empire*, 27.

<sup>72</sup> Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature*, 110.



eyes, so that different qualities from different authors may impose themselves on our minds, to be adopted for use in the place that becomes them best” (10.2.26).<sup>73</sup>

Rosenmeyer further notes that “where genre thinking is scientific, inferred from a sufficient sampling of texts and their properties, model thinking is, as it were, moral, and triggered by predecessors. Quintilian’s history of literature (*Instit. Orat.* 10.1) recites, not genres, but practices.”<sup>74</sup> The note about moral thinking is significant. This is because authors often did not imitate stories simply for the sake of imitation. Readers were expected to catch the similarities between the story they were reading and ones they had heard before and compare them. The previous stories functioned as “literary models to be ... in many cases rivaled.”<sup>75</sup> Authors would set out to produce better imitations, ones that excelled their predecessors in style, philosophical adequacy, or in their depictions of virtue. Seeing the Gospel writers in this way “promotes the evangelists from scribes and editors to creative artists obsessed with ancient Greek poetry, often to portray Jesus as more virtuous than Homer’s heroes.”<sup>76</sup>

Writers also did not work in complete isolation. As with any other work or hobby, one seeks out one’s peers with common interests. Writers possessed a peer group of others who were literate enough to read and comment upon one’s work. Writers, like any other group, “act in ways that are both practical and plausible given their social location and context.”<sup>77</sup> Pliny, for example, writes of having a group of “friends dedicated to the literary enterprise ... characterized by a reciprocity that recognizes common values, ‘of which the most important is the rhetorical

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<sup>73</sup> Quoted by MacDonald, *The Gospels and Homer*, 4.

<sup>74</sup> Rosenmeyer, “Ancient Literary Genres: A Mirage?” 436-437.

<sup>75</sup> Dennis R. MacDonald, *Synopses of Epic, Tragedy, and the Gospels* (Claremont, CA: Mimesis Press, 2022), 2.

<sup>76</sup> MacDonald, *Synopses of Epic, Tragedy, and the Gospels*, 2.

<sup>77</sup> Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature*, 87.

mastery of language.”<sup>78</sup> That means Mark would have had a peer group of other writers who exchanged materials. In fact, Walsh contends that “a writer’s most immediate and formative social network was his circle of fellow writers and literary critics - an interconnected network of authors and literate consumers with particular kinds of intellectual knowledge and skill.”<sup>79</sup> Any religious community the author was a part of may also be formative, but the existence and the influence of these communities needs to be demonstrated, according to Walsh. It was one’s fellow writers who could be expected to be able to read and critique the work at a high level.

There were also practical reasons for this influence, as “authors required the aid of a network of other literate specialists who might sponsor the production of a particular text, circulate writings for critique, gather for recitations or other private readings, and ultimately publish works.”<sup>80</sup> Publication of a work in this era involved “gathering in a private setting to read their compositions aloud and elicit comments from their colleagues.”<sup>81</sup> The material would be discussed, adjustments to the work would be made, and then the author would allow copies of the work to be made, thereby “publishing” it. Even at this point however, there was no guarantee a work would circulate. For that, “the only clear route to recognition as an author was by attachment to, and promotion by, one of these [literary] circles ... by word of mouth, written letters, and by recitations to which a larger acquaintance was invited.”<sup>82</sup> Additionally, “knowledge and even memorization of excerpts, phrases, or other passages from the works within one’s circle of literary *amici*” was common.<sup>83</sup> One’s writing could expand to other literary

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<sup>78</sup> Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature*, 110.

<sup>79</sup> Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature*, 109-110.

<sup>80</sup> Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature*, 119.

<sup>81</sup> Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature*, 119.

<sup>82</sup> Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature*, 120.

<sup>83</sup> Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature*, 120.

circles as these remembered and memorized sections become repeated and recited in different contexts.

### **Why Does This Matter?**

What differences in perspective come from seeing the author of Mark as, first and foremost, a writer? Several immediately spring to mind. First, we can be confident that this individual was familiar with the works of Homer before even digging deeply into the text, as everyone who attained the level of education necessary to write the Gospel of Mark would have been exposed to Homer. He was simply too baked into the educational system to avoid. This is true even if we suppose that Mark was a Jewish individual writing for a Jewish audience. He still would have had to have known his Homer. We can also safely assume from the text itself that Mark would have had “a patent interest in the interpretation of Judean literature,” and possess “an awareness of current issues being discussed among other cultural producers - such as the significance of the destruction of the Temple, Stoic physics, genealogies, territories under imperial control, legislation, and the Mediterranean gods. He is also interested in certain kinds of esoteric or paradoxographical materials: riddles, teachings, signs, and wonder-workings.”<sup>84</sup>

Second, we can safely assume he would have been taught to compose his work using the art of mimesis. What texts or stories he would have imitated would still be up for debate. But composition was taught through strategic imitation of other texts, in ways that both mimicked and attempted to rival their literary antecedents. So it should not be surprising if Mark composed his work by strategically imitating stories from the Hebrew Bible, Homer, or other heroic texts and stories, as that is how he would have been taught to write. He would not compose from

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<sup>84</sup> Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature*, 134.

scratch, as that is not how writing was done. He can fill any gaps in his existing knowledge of Jesus, which may have been great or minimal, with “references to other *bioi* of heroes, philosophers, or divine figures like Alexander the Great.”<sup>85</sup> There was “ample opportunity for the practice of literary allusion” through the Jesus story.<sup>86</sup>

Third, it problematizes or at least calls into question the notion of Mark’s authorial activity as being rooted in a religious community, to the point where Mark is simply transcribing oral tradition with a minimum of authorial innovation. As Sarah Ruden notes, “people were normally considered to have *composed* works, with far-reaching originality, even if they happened to credit the Muses, another deity, or the literary tradition itself, and even if the name of the author is a prestigious pseudonym.”<sup>87</sup> Her subsequent point, that the authors of the Gospels do not seem to write from their own point of view but as if they were omniscient, should not take away from the basic idea that authors *composed* works. Writers were part of an elite circle who circulated works amongst one another regarding topics and themes they found engaging. They did not, as a general rule, seek to transcribe the folk traditions of the local communities. One cannot simply assume that Mark was a follower of Jesus embedded within a local “Markan” community who was recording their oral traditions for that same community. That would have to be demonstrated, not assumed, as it is not generally the way writing was done. This is not to deny that Mark may have been a part of a local Jesus-following community, or that much of what he learned about Jesus he learned from hearing stories told amongst that community. I am not calling into question the existence of an oral tradition. But I do want to insist that Mark be respected as an independent author, with his own perspective, his own

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<sup>85</sup> Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature*, 132.

<sup>86</sup> Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature*, 133.

<sup>87</sup> Ruden, *The Gospels*, xiv.

interests, and his own creative capacity that may not be entirely indebted to any particular local religious community. I am writing this as a Ph.D candidate at Claremont School of Theology (CST), and certainly my experience at CST has colored my writing and thinking. But my thoughts are not necessarily representative of the thoughts of all or even a majority of students at the school, and it would be a huge mistake to treat my work as if I was a local scribe transcribing the religious viewpoints of CST.

Fourth, the one community we can know for sure Mark was a part of is a community of fellow writers, who would have circulated works amongst one another. This would have been necessary for his work as a writer, and was how one got “published.” These communities can be incredibly diverse, linked together only by a shared interest in the art of writing. There is no reason, therefore, to assume going into this Gospel that the author was writing for an exclusively Jewish audience or would have had that perspective and that perspective only centered in his mind. His most immediate audience would have been the group of fellow writers he was a part of, and they may have brought a variety of religious perspectives to the group. Certainly when one reads the Gospel, one finds some Jewish customs being explained as though the audience was not familiar with them, and the overall attitude toward the Law is critical. One cannot reliably say, therefore, that because the early Jesus movement was Jewish, this Gospel must be relentlessly Jewish and cannot have engaged the Greco-Roman world. For all we know, Mark’s circle of writers may have consisted of few, if any, Jewish individuals. They could simply have been curious intellectuals with an interest in Judean literature and figures in that place. There is simply no good reason, if one takes Mark as an independent author, to assume going into the Gospel of Mark that Mark would not have engaged the hero stories of the Greco-Roman world in

his work, through the art of mimesis. Whether he did or not can only be ascertained by close study. It cannot be ruled out *a priori* on the grounds that this is a Jewish movement.

### **Conclusion**

While one can quibble with the details, the central takeaway I hope one has gained from this chapter is that there is every reason to explore the Gospel of Mark in relationship with Homer, Plato, and the wider Greco-Roman world. Furthermore, when one does so, the parallels that emerge are incredibly dense and leap off the page throughout the entirety of the Gospel of Mark. One cannot use the fact of Jesus's Jewishness to escape from having to look at the wider context of the ancient world. This is because Judaism itself was thoroughly characterized by Hellenism, Jesus himself was from "Galilee of the Gentiles," and Mark was first and foremost a writer. This means we can be quite confident that the author of Mark knew Homer, other heroic tales, along with some Greek philosophy and would have been taught to write by practicing the art of mimesis, and that he likely had a diverse audience of other fellow writers in mind when writing. These claims require no additional hypothetical reconstructions of the Markan community to support. They are based on our knowledge of Judaism in this era, and the kinds of practices Mark would have had to have engaged in as a writer. It is as firm a foundation upon which one can build at this moment. I am not engaging in an idiosyncratic, tendentious reading by analyzing Mark in relationship with heroic literature, Homer, and Plato. I am filling a gap in the literature that needs to be filled.

### *Chapter Three: What Kind of Hero?*

This brings the argument to an important point. It is insufficient to establish that Jesus fits the mold of a Greco-Roman hero without also asking what kind of hero he was. That is because the hero in Greco-Roman literature serves an exemplary function. They model, through action and inaction, how one is to live in the world, providing positive and negative examples. Heroes, through their transgressions and upholdings of classical notions of justice, demonstrated “the proper balance of conduct among people and between people and the gods,” with embodied ideals that “were determined by custom and tradition and, while not written into law, are often termed the heroic code. The heroic code included among other virtues prowess in battle, wisdom in the forum of public council, due honor for others of every rank, hospitality to strangers and visitors, and courage in difficulties and especially in the face of death.”<sup>1</sup> Understanding how Jesus modeled, fulfilled, and altered the heroic code is essential to understanding the kind of hero he is.

One helpful way to approach that question is by looking at a tension that runs through the whole of the *Iliad*, the question of what the poem even intends to say. One might expect that the seminal writing in the ancient world on Greco-Roman heroes to paint an unambiguous portrait celebrating the heroes and their incredible achievements. That would fit with the exemplary option given above, and provide a clear guide for moral education. However, as Richard Martin notes, it is only one possible interpretation of the *Iliad* that

would concentrate on the character of a heroic fighter faithful to an ideal and ready to die in its defense. But are we then talking about Hektor, loyal to Troy to the end? Or Achilles, defender of the very notion of the reciprocal privileges of heroism, as represented by marks of honor? Is the *Iliad* a celebration of heroism

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<sup>1</sup> Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*, 37.

or an interrogation of its basic—potentially flawed—assumptions? Whom should we emulate, if anyone, in this somber depiction of men and women under extreme conditions?<sup>2</sup>

On the one hand, almost every man in the *Iliad* seems to take the heroic ideal as a given. It is Achilles and few others who begin to seriously question whether any of this makes any sense. That question, whether the heroic life is worth it in the end, runs throughout the *Iliad* and never receives a clear answer. The *Iliad* can easily be read as a “distinctive transformation of the traditional themes of heroic poetry into a critical and tragic meditation on the human condition.”<sup>3</sup> This is one of the reasons the *Iliad* continues to fascinate. Every reader sees something different in the text and takes away differing lessons, and none of the interpretations is unambiguously correct. The *Iliad* paints a complex, nuanced picture of the human condition with the tensions and contradictions inherent therein. I want to suggest, however, that these tensions get possible resolutions in the understanding of the heroic life given in the Gospel of Mark. But before unpacking Mark’s resolutions, it is necessary to take stock of the difficulties present in the heroic life in the *Iliad*.

### **The Question of Motivation**

Peter Ahrensdorf correctly notes that for Achilles, in his opening speeches against Agamemnon, “a certain problematic tension within his understanding of virtue makes itself felt.”<sup>4</sup> As will be explored in more depth later, the primary engine driving the Trojan War forward is the desire to win honor and glory on the battlefield. Few people on the Greek side

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Martin, “Introduction to Richmond Lattimore’s *Iliad*,” in *The Iliad of Homer*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 52-53.

<sup>3</sup> Seth L. Schein, *The Mortal Hero* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 89.

<sup>4</sup> Peter J. Ahrensdorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 140.



have any actual animosity toward the city of Troy. But they fight the Trojan army to win honor, glory, and unending renown for themselves. Achilles says:

I for my part did not come here for the sake of the Trojan  
 spearman to fight against them, since to me they have done nothing.  
 Never yet have they driven away my cattle or my horses,  
 never in Phthia where the soil is rich and men grow great did they  
 spoil my harvest, since indeed there is much that lies between us,  
 the shadowy mountains and the echoing sea; but for your sake,  
 O great shamelessness, we followed, to do you favor,  
 you with the dog's eyes, to win your honor and Menelaos'  
 from the Trojans. You forget all this or else you care nothing.  
 And now my prize you threaten in person to strip from me,  
 for whom I labored much, the gift of the sons of the Achaians.  
 Never, when the Achaians sack some well-founded citadel  
 of the Trojans, do I have a prize that is equal to your prize.  
 Always the greater part of the painful fighting is the work of  
 my hands; but when the time comes to distribute the booty  
 yours is far the greater reward, and I with some small thing  
 yet dear to me go back to my ships when I am weary with fighting.  
 Now I am returning to Phthia, since it is much better  
 to go home again with my curved ships, and I am minded no longer  
 to stay here dishonored and pile up your wealth and your luxury.<sup>5</sup>

Achilles makes it plain he has no issue with the Trojans; he is only here fighting to help win honor, particularly for the sons of Atreus, Agamemnon and Menelaus. Ahrens Dorf argues that this means that Achilles “believes the virtuous life to be fundamentally noble and self-denying, since, at its core, it entails making sacrifices for others. Accordingly, he stresses that he has been fighting for Agamemnon in a spirit of generosity rather than out of personal need or self-interest.”<sup>6</sup> Achilles sees himself as making personal sacrifices for the war effort, and believes these efforts usually do not win him the personal fortune or glory he feels he is owed for doing more than his share of the fighting. As will become apparent throughout the *Iliad*, the Greek army finds itself lost without Achilles. The life of virtue and heroism Achilles is pursuing “is

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<sup>5</sup> Hom., *Il.* 1.152-171. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from the *Iliad* are taken from Richmond Lattimore, trans., *The Iliad of Homer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 140.

essentially painful, since it entails nobly sacrificing one's own good for the good of others. As Achilles stresses, he has 'toiled much' for the Achaians and he exhausts himself fighting for others."<sup>7</sup> But what does the virtuous person gain in return? Achilles voices his frustration here, believing that "the virtuous man deserves to live more than a life of suffering, more than a life of pain and sacrifice and exhaustion. He deserves a 'prize,' a 'dear' token of esteem and admiration."<sup>8</sup> In other words, he "believes that the virtuous life is noble and self-denying but also that it ought to be beneficial to the man who leads it. The virtuous life ought to be graced specifically with honor."<sup>9</sup> When that honor is taken from him, he has no more reason to fight.

Honor must also be freely given. It is not really an honor if one demands it as recompense. It must be a gift from the community to the individual, recognizing them for their honorable deeds. Achilles wants the honor due him, but it must be freely bestowed upon him by others. When that is denied him, it "evidently leads him to wonder whether there is anything truly beneficial about the virtuous life, whether that life is not simply a miserable and pointless life of unappreciated sacrifice, and hence whether it is good for him to continue to lead that painful life at all."<sup>10</sup> His only hope is that the gods will intervene on his behalf, making it plain to all that there is a cost to denying someone the honor they are due.

But the gods themselves fail to ensure this is the case. When Athena comes down to intervene in the dispute between Achilles and Agamemnon, it is Achilles that she counsels to stay his anger. She offers no advice to Agamemnon encouraging him to let go of his desire for Briseis, the woman Achilles had been given as his prize. Agamemnon has defied Apollo, acted

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<sup>7</sup> Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 140.

<sup>8</sup> Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 140-141.

<sup>9</sup> Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 141.

<sup>10</sup> Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 141.

rashly and arrogantly, and in return Athena and Hera come to the aid not of Achilles, but Agamemnon. The gods themselves have petty reasons for preserving the conflict, and what drives the battle is less the scales of justice weighing out rewards for those deserving of them and more the destructive, uncaring impulses of the gods. What is to motivate heroic behavior in the face of that kind of conduct by the gods? What motivates a heroic life when that life promises to be one of hardship, toil, and pain? The *Iliad* does not provide a definitive answer. What ends up motivating Achilles to get back into the thick of battle is not any justice delivered to him by the gods, but the death of Patroclus. His grief and anger bring him back, not justice. The need to come up with healthier approaches to the pursuit of honor and a more firm foundation for risking one's life can be seen in the Gospel of Mark, which provides an alternative approach to those seen in the *Iliad*. This will be the subject of chapter 4.

### **The Question of Violence**

Much of the *Iliad* seems devoted to illustrating the futility of war and the desire to be free from a life characterized by it and little else. In Book II, for example, Agamemnon seeks to test his soldiers by telling them that Zeus instructed him to turn around, leave Troy, and head for home. The poem then reads:

So he spoke, and stirred up the passion in the breast of all those  
 who were within that multitude and listened to his counsel.  
 And the assembly was shaken as on the sea the big waves  
 in the main by Ikaria, when the south and south-east winds  
 driving down from the clouds of Zeus the father whip them.  
 As when the west wind moves across the grain deep standing,  
 boisterously, and shakes and sweeps it till the tassels lean, so  
 all of that assembly was shaken, the men in tumult  
 swept to the ships, and underneath their feet the dust lifted  
 and rose high, and the men were all shouting to one another  
 to lay hold on the ships and drag them down to the bright sea.  
 They cleaned out the keel channels and their cries hit skyward

as they made for home and snatched the props from under the vessels.  
Then for the Argives a homecoming beyond fate might have  
been accomplished, had not Hera spoken a word to Athene.<sup>11</sup>

All the army needed was permission from Agamemnon and they rushed to the exits as fast as they could. The effect is almost comical - this great army, nine years into the war, ready to drop everything and leave at a moment's notice. So fast were they moving they would have contravened their fate - the gods needed to intervene to stop the Trojan War from ending that very moment. This can hardly be characterized as promotional material for a life of violence or the heroic ideal.

Another example can be seen in Book II with the speech of Thersites. He is unambiguously portrayed in a negative light, described once as "the ugliest man who had come beneath Ilion,"<sup>12</sup> with "knew within his head many words, but disorderly; / vain, and without decency, to quarrel with the princes / with any word he thought might be amusing to the Argives,"<sup>13</sup> and ends up mocked and laughed at by the rest of the army. However, what exactly does he say?

Son of Atreus, what thing further do you want, or find fault with  
now? Your shelters are filled with bronze; there are plenty of the choicest  
women for you within your shelter, whom we Achaians  
give to you first of all whenever we capture some stronghold.  
Or is it still more gold you will be wanting, that some son  
of the Trojans, breakers of horses, brings as ransom out of Ilion,  
one that I, or some other Achaian, capture and bring in?  
Is it some young woman to lie with in love and keep her  
all to yourself apart from the others? It is not right for  
you, their leader, to lead in sorrow the sons of the Achaians.  
My good fools, poor abuses, you women, not men, of Achaia,  
let us go back home in our ships, and leave this man here  
by himself in Troy to mull his prizes of honor

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<sup>11</sup> Hom., *Il.* 2.142-156.

<sup>12</sup> Hom., *Il.* 2.216.

<sup>13</sup> Hom., *Il.* 2.213-215.

that he may find out whether or not we others are helping him.<sup>14</sup>

One searches in vain for something said by Thersites that could not have been said by Achilles at this exact moment in the epic. Odysseus notably does not so much attempt to prove him wrong as simply threaten and beat him for insubordination. Simone Weil, in a famous article offering a reading of the *Iliad* that is very much anti-war, calls his comments “perfectly reasonable.”<sup>15</sup> He can be mocked and ridiculed for them, but they nonetheless get expressed in the *Iliad* itself, and they prove to be a driving force for the plot in the actions of Achilles.

This skepticism of war continues. After the mocking of Thersites, everyone gets ready to fight, and marches onto the field apparently eager for battle. No sooner did they arrive on the battlefield, however, then Paris on the Trojan side “challenged all the best of the Argives / to fight man to man against him in bitter combat.”<sup>16</sup> Menelaus accepts this challenge, and after retreating, Paris is shamed into going through with the duel. The epic then says “the Trojans and Achaians were joyful, / hoping now to be rid of all the sorrow of warfare.”<sup>17</sup> In the one morning, they go from a full scale retreat, to battle-hardened warriors, to individuals happy to let Paris and Menelaus settle their dispute and everyone else go home.

The fight goes as poorly for Paris as was foreshadowed, and he is only saved from certain death by Aphrodite, who whisks him away from the conflict and returns him to his “perfumed bedchamber.”<sup>18</sup> Once again, for the second time that morning, there was an opportunity to end the conflict that all except for Paris would have been happy to take. Even Hector on the Trojan

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<sup>14</sup> Hom., *Il.* 2.225-238.

<sup>15</sup> Simone Weil, “The Iliad, or the Poem of Force,” in *War and the Iliad*, trans. Mary McCarthy (New York: New York Review Books, 2005), 12.

<sup>16</sup> Hom., *Il.* 3.19-20.

<sup>17</sup> Hom., *Il.* 3.111-12.

<sup>18</sup> Hom., *Il.* 3.382.

side says to Paris, “Better had you never been born, or killed unwedded,”<sup>19</sup> and tells him that his taking of Helen was “to your father a big sorrow, and your city, and all your people, / to yourself a thing shameful but bringing joy to the enemy.”<sup>20</sup> Shortly after Hector’s taunts towards Paris, Zeus taunts Hera, saying,

So, the victory now is with warlike Menelaos.  
Let us consider then how these things shall be accomplished,  
whether again to stir up grim warfare and the terrible  
fighting, or cast down love and make them friends with each other.  
If somehow this way could be sweet and pleasing to all of us,  
the city of lord Priam might still be a place men dwell in,  
and Menelaos could take away with him Helen of Argos.<sup>21</sup>

Zeus has no issue with the Trojans and indicates he would be content with the war’s end. Athena and Hera, however, are not, and so once again that morning the war is continued only through the intervention of the gods. It is apparent that

fate and the gods decide the changing lot of battle. Within the limits fixed by fate, the gods determine with sovereign authority victory and defeat. It is always they who provoke these fits of madness, these treacheries, which are forever blocking peace; war is their true business; their only motives, caprice and malice. As for the warriors, victors or vanquished, those comparisons which liken them to beasts and things [in the poem] can inspire neither admiration nor contempt, but only regret that men are capable of being so transformed.<sup>22</sup>

It is the gods and fate in the *Iliad* who bring this war and devastation upon humanity, and an attitude of bitterness about this can be seen throughout. There are opportunities for an end to the conflict, accompanied by lamentations for the lives these warriors could have been living, peacefully at home with their families, but instead they are subjected to force and violence. Weil writes that in the *Iliad*, “the shame of the coerced spirit is neither disguised, nor enveloped in

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<sup>19</sup> Hom., *Il.* 3.40

<sup>20</sup> Hom., *Il.* 3.50-51.

<sup>21</sup> Hom., *Il.* 4.13-19

<sup>22</sup> Weil, “The Iliad, or the Poem of Force,” 32.

facile pity, nor held up to scorn; here more than one spirit bruised and degraded by misfortune is offered for our admiration.”<sup>23</sup> It is a depiction of conflict that places side by side the nobility of the heroes and the futility and sheer waste of war and the human toll it takes. So while the story can be seen as modeling the heroic code, the depictions of the violence, particularly the death of Patroclus, make it anything but a one-sided portrayal of that code. Rather, according to Kevin Crotty, “With the death of Patroclus it becomes clear that the *Iliad* is not, ultimately, a story about the warrior code, or the search for ‘unperishable renown,’ but rather about griefs and emotions - especially *eleos* [pity] - roused by human suffering.”<sup>24</sup> This complements the conclusion of Emily Austin, who writes that “the particular shape of Achilles’ grief, that yearning for an irrecoverable wholeness, becomes a way to understand the *Iliad*’s profound meditation on the futility of vengeance and the unassuageable nature of anger born from grief ... it is driven by a desire for what it can never fulfill, the restoration of the person lost.”<sup>25</sup> The *Iliad*, therefore, is marked by a tension between its portrayal of the heroic ideal and frank questioning of that ideal, asking its hearers and readers whether the cost of the heroic ideal is worth it in the end.

Intriguingly, at the end of her essay, Simone Weil says, as also quoted in the Introduction, that “the Gospels are the last marvelous expression of the Greek genius, as the *Iliad* is the first: here the Greek spirit reveals itself not only in the injunction given mankind to seek above all other goods, ‘the kingdom and justice of our Heavenly Father,’ but also in the fact that human suffering is laid bare, and we see it in a being who is at once divine and human.”<sup>26</sup> Just as

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<sup>23</sup> Weil, “The Iliad, or the Poem of Force,” 34.

<sup>24</sup> Kevin Crotty, *The Poetics of Supplication: Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 59.

<sup>25</sup> Emily P. Austin, *Grief and the Hero: The Futility of Longing in the Iliad* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021), 2.

<sup>26</sup> Weil, “The Iliad, or the Poem of Force,” 34.

the *Iliad* showcases the suffering of its heroes, including figures like Achilles who are part divine and part human, the Gospels, none more so than Mark, showcases the suffering of its hero Jesus, who despite his obvious morality and noble character must suffer and die to fulfill the divine will (Mark 14:36). Just like Hector, Jesus endures the crucifixion having been forsaken by God, despite being led to this fate by God. Weil also writes that this sense of human misery under fate “cannot be separated from the idea that inspired the Gospels, for the sense of human misery is a precondition of justice and love. He who does not realize to what extent shifting fortune and necessity hold in subjection every human spirit, cannot regard as fellow-creatures nor love as he loves himself those whom chance separated from him by an abyss ... Only he who has measured the dominion of force, and knows how not to respect it, is capable of love and justice.” In order to truly love one’s enemies, one must reckon with the extent to which those enemies are under the bondage of force and necessity, and thereby come to see them not as an enemy but as a potential friend, someone with a great capacity for goodness swallowed up by fate and force that compels them to hostile action. In this, Weil writes, the Gospels have more in common with the *Iliad* than they do with the Hebrew Bible, since “with the Hebrews, it was their God who exalted them and they retained their superior position just as long as they obeyed Him ... Misfortune was a sure indication of sin and hence a legitimate object of contempt; to them a vanquished enemy was abhorrent to God himself and condemned to expiate all sorts of crimes - this is a view that makes cruelty permissible and indeed indispensable.”<sup>27</sup> This seems true of much of the Hebrew Bible and the history of the religious tradition, although one can see that changing in Second Temple Judaism with the rise of martyrdom for one’s faith. But certainly the logic of Deuteronomy, to take one example, suggests that any misfortune suffered by the nation of Israel

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<sup>27</sup> Weil, “The Iliad, or the Poem of Force,” 35, 36.



is endured because of the sins of the nation, misfortune that can be mitigated and prevented in the future by being faithful to God. The Gospel of Mark, and the *Iliad*, contain no such illusions. Misfortune is endured by everyone. Suffering does not make one a sinner; it may, in fact, make one a hero. In this, Weil notes, the Gospel of Mark and the *Iliad* share similar ideas.

The problem of violence will be explored in more depth later, but it is worth noting here that, while both the *Iliad* and the Gospel of Mark have suffering, violence, and force as common themes, in the *Iliad* these themes are problematized and then go unresolved. There is no attempt made at depicting a different type of hero, one that would not be burdened with a life of violence. The closest it comes is the more humane Achilles seen in Book XXIV, where he gives Hector's body back to Priam and recognizes their common fate in losing someone dear to them.

Ahrens Dorf notes that

the very end of the *Iliad* seems to present Achilles at his most admirable. The wrath of Achilles, which was condemned so sharply by Homer at the beginning of the poem and which has caused so much suffering for so many, including Achilles himself, now gives way to the compassion of Achilles. The *Iliad* closes, as it opens, with a suffering father pleading with a mighty Achaian ruler for the return of his child. But while the poem begins with the cruel rebuff by Agamemnon of the Trojan ally Chryses, it concludes with the kindly sympathy of Achilles for the Trojan king Priam.<sup>28</sup>

When Achilles first is addressed by Priam, it arouses within him

a passion of grieving  
for his own father. He took the old man's hand and pushed him  
gently away, and the two remembered, as Priam sat huddled  
at the feet of Achilleus and wept close for manslaughtering Hektor  
and Achilleus wept now for his own father, now again  
for Patroklos. The sound of their mourning moved in the house.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 190.

<sup>29</sup> Hom., *Il.* 24.507-512.

This is incredible growth for a hero once characterized by sheer rage. However, it still rears its head, and not long thereafter Achilles is threatening to kill Priam, saying “you must not further make my spirit move in my sorrows, / for fear, old sir, I might not let you alone in my shelter, / suppliant as you are; and be guilty before the god’s orders.”<sup>30</sup> So while there is growth, Achilles remains wrathful at times, and has not resolved his central dilemma. He simply acknowledges, rather, the capriciousness of the gods. He says to Priam,

... you and I will even let  
our sorrows lie still in the heart for all our grieving. There is not  
any advantage to be won from grim lamentation.  
Such is the way the gods spun life for unfortunate mortals,  
that we live in unhappiness, but the gods themselves have no sorrows.<sup>31</sup>

The gods get to live without sorrow, while it is fate that humanity suffers violence, even the most noble ones. And indeed, by killing Hector, Achilles has sealed his own fate and will not depart from the Trojan War alive.

It is simply a given for the epic that heroism involves demonstrating one’s courage and prowess on the battlefield, and that this very endeavor destroys a person and everything they love. It is an ultimately tragic view of life. This is not the case in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus models a heroic life, a courageous life, but a life that repudiates the practicing of violence. Jesus is a non-violent hero. In other words, while the *Iliad* exposes the problems with violence, it cannot resolve those problems while still remaining true to the heroic ideal. The Gospel of Mark, with its adjusted take on the heroic life, suggests a viable way forward. This will be the subject of chapter 5.

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<sup>30</sup> Hom., *Il.* 24.568-570.

<sup>31</sup> Hom., *Il.* 24.522-526.

## **The Question of Knowledge**

Another issue that goes unresolved in the *Iliad* is the question of how one is to know what the heroic course of action actually is if one moves away from an ethos of violence. What to do from moment to moment is resolved through revelatory systems like augury. The idea is to discern the divine will through these signs. But seemingly little thought is given to the justice of the cause for which one is fighting. As noted above, most of the Greek army has no issue whatsoever with the Trojans, and would be happy to let them be in peace. They have come simply to rectify the harm done to Menelaus through the taking of his wife, Helen, to Troy. This is a harm done only to Menelaus, but yet the entire city of Troy and countless innocent Greeks are doomed to suffer as a result. Most of the heroes profiled are there not because of a deep, abiding love for Agamemnon and Menelaus but to win honor and glory for themselves. Achilles, despite his protestations to the contrary that he is simply there on behalf of Menelaus and Agamemnon and fights for them, is comfortable with watching the Greek army perish if, in fighting, he receives no honor. He says to Agamemnon, in the presence of the Greek army:

Some day longing for Achilleus will come to the sons of the Achaians,  
all of them. Then stricken at heart though you be, you will be able  
to do nothing, when in their numbers before man-slaughtering Hektor  
they drop and die. And then you will eat out the heart within you  
in sorrow, that you did no honor to the best of the Achaians.<sup>32</sup>

Achilles tells the Greek army he would rather see them perish instead of fight, if by fighting he has to endure Agamemnon's rule any longer.

Not only is the issue of what cause to fight for left undetermined, but so is the issue of discerning the divine will. This is because the gods are simply not honest, loyal, or trustworthy. To take but one well-known example, in Book II, Zeus decides to "destroy many beside the ships

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<sup>32</sup> Hom., *Il.* 1.240-244.

of the Achaians,”<sup>33</sup> and he does so by rallying Agamemnon to fight in a dream. Zeus plants the idea that the Greek army will seize Troy that very day, that the gods are all united behind

Agamemnon and he is at the cusp of victory. The dream

spoke and went away, and left Agamemnon  
there, believing things in his heart that were not to be accomplished.  
For he thought that on that very day he would take Priam’s city;  
fool, who knew nothing of all the things Zeus planned to accomplish,  
Zeus, who yet was minded to visit tears and sufferings  
on Trojans and Danaäns alike in the strong encounters.<sup>34</sup>

While the text calls him a fool, all he did was believe a dream sent to him by Zeus directly. He can hardly be faulted for listening to Zeus. How can one actually serve the gods when the gods are this deceitful? These are the kinds of questions that will eventually result in the *Euthyphro* dilemma posed by Plato.

Nor are the gods loyal. Later, after the duel between Paris and Menelaus ends in shame for Paris, Zeus brings up the idea of sparing Troy, which upsets Hera. Zeus, relenting, says:

Do as you please then. Never let this quarrel hereafter  
be between you and me a bitterness for both of us.  
And put away in your thoughts this other thing that I tell you:  
whenever I in turn am eager to lay waste some city,  
as I please, one in which are dwelling men who are dear to you,  
you shall not stand in the way of my anger, but let me do it,  
since I was willing to grant you this with my heart unwilling.  
For of all the cities beneath the sun and the starry heaven  
dwelt in by men who live upon the earth, there has never been one  
honored nearer to my heart than sacred Ilion  
and Priam, and the people of Priam of the strong ash spear.  
Never yet has my altar gone without fair sacrifice,  
the libation and the savor, since this is our portion of honor.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Hom., *Il.* 2.4.

<sup>34</sup> Hom., *Il.* 2.35-40.

<sup>35</sup> Hom., *Il.* 4.37-49

Zeus relents, despite how good the Trojans have been to him. He is an unreliable god. How can he be trusted? One might expect Hera to protest, to save the cities most dear to her, but instead, she says, “Of all cities there are three that are dearest to my own heart: / Argos and Sparta and Mykenai of the wide ways. All these, / whenever they become hateful to your heart, sack utterly.”<sup>36</sup> She not only does not come to their defense, but offers a list of the most important ones to her if Zeus wants to sack them! How can one know what is good, what is noble, what is honorable, if this is what the gods are like? How can one navigate their way through the world successfully when even honoring the greatest of the gods brings about no help or assistance? To return to the words of Achilles quoted above, the only answer the *Iliad* can offer is to do what one is told, to honor those who are honorable, and hope for the best, since the gods are fickle and have stitched together a fabric of suffering for human beings, regardless of what they do, with no guarantee of a reward. It is difficult to secure a firm foundation for knowledge or morality under these conditions. This is another area where a tension left unresolved in the *Iliad* gets an answer in the Gospel of Mark. That will be the topic of chapter 6.

### **One More Clarification**

To be clear, the argument I am making is not that Mark had the *Iliad* at the forefront of his mind when he was composing his Gospel, although that cannot be ruled out, given what we know about writing practices in the ancient world. The claim I want to advance is more limited. The story of Jesus is a hero story, and as a result can be fruitfully compared with the most important hero stories, the *Iliad* above all, in the Greco-Roman world. Furthermore, I would claim that Mark needs to be taken seriously as an intellectual document responding to issues

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<sup>36</sup> Hom., *Il.* 4.51-53.

present in the Greek legacy, issues that have crept into other cultures as well thanks to Hellenism, including ancient Roman and Jewish cultures. These issues must be wrestled with by thoughtful, reflective people in the ancient world, and the Gospel of Mark represents one attempt to do so. The Gospel of Mark is not simply the work of a local scribe transcribing oral traditions about Jesus, but an attempt to seriously grapple with some of the thorniest existential problems in the ancient world, the same problems that can be seen by any thoughtful reader or listener absorbing the works of Homer. This comparison between the Gospel of Mark and the *Iliad*, along with its reception history, should help illuminate aspects of the text that may not be immediately obvious to twenty-first century readers, and helps us better understand how the text would have been received in its original context. This literary comparison can help us better understand and interpret the Gospel of Mark.

## **Chapter Four: The Problem of Death and Honor**

One of the foremost ways heroism and courage is manifested in the Gospel of Mark is in Jesus's power over death. This is also the most prominent way courage is manifested in the *Iliad*, only instead of having the power over death, it is manifested in the ability to face death squarely, without forsaking one's duty.

### **Courage and Death**

Paul Tillich wrote that "the courage to be is the ethical act in which man affirms his own being in spite of those elements of his existence which conflict with his essential self-affirmation."<sup>1</sup> Few things conflict with our being as radically as does the threat of total non-being, or death. It threatens to end our existence entirely, and can leave us frightened and without a sense of control. Whatever happens after death, the individual is powerless to control, plan for, or change. An individual can have firm opinions and beliefs, but ultimately these are speculation. No one knows for certain, and that uncertainty is frightening. This fear of death gets combined with the power of fate, a sense that our own lives are outside of our power and control as well. Death leaves us radically at the mercy of fate. Tillich argues that "the anxiety of fate and death is most basic, most universal, and inescapable. All attempts to argue it away are futile."<sup>2</sup> It impacts every person, in every cultural configuration. Ernest Becker writes that "the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity -

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 3rd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 40.

activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man.”<sup>3</sup>

This is done in a variety of ways, both now and in the ancient world in which the Gospel of Mark was written. Some turn the idea of death into a joke. One popular Epicurean tombstone inscription in the ancient world reads, “*non fui, fui, non sum, non curo*.”<sup>4</sup> Translated, this means “I was not, I was, I am not, I don’t care.” While flippant, it expresses a powerful idea for coping with death, namely, that the individual self has nothing to do with death. So long as there is an “I” that exists, then death has not come for me. Once I cease to exist however, then there is no experiencing “I” to have any reaction to it whatsoever. So death need not be a concern for me, for so long as there is a me to worry about, it is free from death. This is a clever bit of argumentation; however, it still leaves us facing the prospect of non-being, of a day when I no longer exist, and raises questions regarding the meaningfulness of life itself.

The anxiety of death also underlies the power of hero stories because, according to Becker, “heroism is first and foremost a reflex of the terror of death. We admire most the courage to face death; we give such valor our highest and most constant adoration; it moves us deeply in our hearts because we have doubts about how brave we ourselves would be.”<sup>5</sup> The reaction here in America to the firefighters rushing into the Twin Towers on 9/11 is an excellent contemporary example of this. We admire them because we are not sure we would have the courage to do the same. There is something inspiring about the courage to face one’s non-being with resilience, not shirking one’s other duties but having the power to embrace the best of humanity through facing death head-on.

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<sup>3</sup> Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), ix.

<sup>4</sup> Riley, “What Has Galilee to Do with Jerusalem?,” 46n4.

<sup>5</sup> Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 12.



Courage in the face of death is also the one thing that mortals have the ability to do that the gods of Greco-Roman mythology do not. The gods are primarily distinguished from human beings by their deathlessness. They are not moral exemplars. The gods have every bit of the mixed moral constitution that human beings have, something Plato would later vigorously criticize. The gods in Homer can seem “undignified, even frivolous.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, “that the gods are capricious, unreliable, and fundamentally indifferent beings proves, then, to be a central teaching set forth by Homer in the *Iliad*.”<sup>7</sup> But, unlike humans, they do not die. Consequently, they do not face risk to the same extent as do mortal heroes.

For this reason, “it is the human heroes of the poem, not the gods, who excite our interest and admiration” according to Peter Ahrensdorf.<sup>8</sup> It is the human characters that capture our attention because “the humans in the poem suffer terrible things but the gods do not, and cannot.”<sup>9</sup> It is the human characters who can suffer and even die, and therefore have to manifest courage in a way that is impossible for gods, who risk little to nothing at every moment. The humans for Homer are “beings who are always aware that death may cut them down at any moment and that death may snatch their loved ones away from them at any moment. And the sheer fact that the humans are so vulnerable to death means that literally everything is at stake for them in their choices and in their actions.”<sup>10</sup> This, incidentally, is also the insight of modern existentialist philosophy as well. Human decisions matter because of the courage they alone are

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<sup>6</sup> Ahrensdorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 25.

<sup>7</sup> Ahrensdorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 59.

<sup>8</sup> Ahrensdorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 28.

<sup>9</sup> Ahrensdorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 64.

<sup>10</sup> Ahrensdorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 64.

able to manifest. “It is, paradoxically, their very imperfection that gives them a certain capacity for nobility and for greatness, for great courage, great love, and great understanding.”<sup>11</sup>

Emphasizing this point, Ahrens Dorf goes on to say that because the gods are immortal, “they are not and cannot be noble or profound beings, beings with our human capacity for courage, for love, and even for wisdom.”<sup>12</sup> He further notes the way this can be seen in Book I of the *Iliad*. The conflict between Hera and Zeus in that book first of all manifests the moral corruptibility of the gods, as Zeus triumphs in his dispute with Hera by threatening to beat her. And “it ends with unquenchable laughter and good cheer.”<sup>13</sup> It inevitably ends this way, according to Ahrens Dorf, because there is nothing major at stake. He writes, “Why in the world should the deathless gods make much fuss about a dispute among themselves when they know that they have been bickering for millennia and will do so for the rest of time? And why in the world should the immortal gods quarrel over *mortal* beings, whose lives are but a brief moment in the eternal lives of the gods?”<sup>14</sup> By contrast, the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles is weighty and profound. It “leads to tears and terrible suffering for all concerned,” including the death of Achilles’ best friend, Patroclus. Many other heroes besides will also meet their demise because of this dispute. The stakes are high and the consequences really matter. The contrast with the dispute of the gods could not be any more clear.

Ultimately, it is mortality that gives rise to the opportunity for courage, and so “by definition, no immortal god can ever exhibit the courage or nobility of a mortal being who deliberately exposes himself to the evil of death.”<sup>15</sup> It is simply impossible for the gods. Since

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<sup>11</sup> Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 65.

<sup>12</sup> Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 65.

<sup>13</sup> Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 65.

<sup>14</sup> Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 65-66.

<sup>15</sup> Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 66.

the gods “cannot die, they risk nothing; for this reason their existence, compared with that of mortals, is trivial. They emphasize by contrast the seriousness of the human condition, in which winning honor and glory alone makes a brief life meaningful and enables an individual to stand out in his own and in others’ eyes.”<sup>16</sup> Their immortality “deprives their lives of the drama, the dignity, and the possible nobility that our human lives possess by virtue of our mortality.”<sup>17</sup>

Because of this connection between courage or mortality, the concept of courage for Homer is almost entirely illustrated on the battlefield of war. By demonstrating boldness on the battlefield, a willingness not to shy away from danger or death, the warrior is the one who manifests the virtue of courage most obviously. Andrei Zavaliy suggests historical roots for this fact, stemming from the late Mycenaean Age. Zavaliy writes, “When the very physical survival of a tribal group is at constant risk in a chaotic world of perpetual hostilities, it is indeed expected that personal qualities of high social utility, such as physical strength and fighting skills combined with an aggressive temper, would be elevated far above the more ‘private’ manifestations of a strong character.”<sup>18</sup> Being rooted in a less stable, more dangerous age, it makes sense that those who could best fight would be the bearers of the virtue of courage, and those skills elevated in the minds of young people through stories. Courage also seems to be foremost among the virtues for Homer, with “being courageous and successful in battle com[ing] very close in many contexts of the Homeric narrative to being virtuous *simpliciter*.”<sup>19</sup>

There are a number of Greek words Homer uses to describe courage, such as θάρσος, ἀλκή, μένος, ἐσθλός, with the most important by far being θυμός. The word θυμός comes from

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<sup>16</sup> Schein, *The Mortal Hero*, 70.

<sup>17</sup> Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 66.

<sup>18</sup> Andrei G. Zavaliy, *Courage and Cowardice in Ancient Greece* (Switzerland: Springer, 2020), 17.

<sup>19</sup> Zavaliy, *Courage and Cowardice in Ancient Greece*, 25.

the Greek word θυμός, which roughly translates as “rage, seethe.” Liddell-Scott describes θυμός as the “soul, spirit, as the principle of life, feeling and thought, esp. of strong feeling and passion.”<sup>20</sup> The usage of the word in Homer according to Zavalij is “much less precise than one might wish,”<sup>21</sup> but can be understood roughly as “the quasi-physical seat of both reasoning and certain strong emotions, such as anger, righteous indignation, and vengeful feeling ... which, in turn, serve as effective internal motivators of risk defying behavior.”<sup>22</sup> He also helpfully notes the attempt at definition given by Angela Hobbs, who describes it as “a general term for both the seat of feeling and thought and for the passions themselves, particularly anger ... It is a physical thing with spiritual dimensions, the stuff of consciousness, passions, and thought. It is perhaps best viewed as the life force, and from it stems fierceness and energy (*menos*), boldness and courage (*tharsos*) and anger (*holos*).”<sup>23</sup> As is plain from her definition, the virtue of courage stems from the θυμός. Agamemnon, in his initial dispute with Achilles at the very beginning of the *Iliad*, tells Achilles that he can flee if his θυμός so desires,<sup>24</sup> a biting insult given that one’s θυμός was supposed to be the seat of a man’s courage. Achilles, after beginning to draw his sword, describes himself as being angry in his θυμῷ with Athena.<sup>25</sup> It is sometimes seen in tandem with other words denoting courage or might, as when Achilles goes out to face Aeneas with μένος καὶ θυμός.<sup>26</sup> Achilles then asks Aeneas what has driven him out so far in front of the rest of the Trojans to fight him, if it was not his θυμός which drove him to fight.<sup>27</sup> It can also just

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<sup>20</sup> Liddell, Henry George, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones. *A Greek-English Lexicon*. 9th ed. with revised supplement. Oxford: Clarendon, 1996.

<sup>21</sup> Zavalij, *Courage and Cowardice in Ancient Greece*, 19.

<sup>22</sup> Zavalij, *Courage and Cowardice in Ancient Greece*, 19.

<sup>23</sup> Angela Hobbs, *Plato and the Hero* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 8.

<sup>24</sup> Hom., *Il.* 1.173.

<sup>25</sup> Hom., *Il.* 1.217.

<sup>26</sup> Hom., *Il.* 20.175.

<sup>27</sup> Hom., *Il.* 20.180.

mean life, as when Ares sought to kill Diomedes, or to take away his θυμόν.<sup>28</sup> The θυμός can also think and be reasoned with, as Odysseus does when the rest of the Greeks retreat from an intense attack by the Trojan forces. He describes his θυμός as debating what to do, but knowing he must stand his ground to win honor, he does so.<sup>29</sup>

### **The Motivation for Courage**

But this still requires addressing the larger question: given the risks involved, why should human beings manifest courage in the first place? What was the motivation that made this greater nobility possible?

This is something that Achilles must wrestle with throughout the duration of the *Iliad*. Achilles has two possible fates set before him, and he gets to choose which one he will pursue. In one possible fate, he leaves Troy alive and unharmed. His lifespan (αἰών) will last a very long time, and his end (τέλος θανάτου) will be slow in catching up with him. However, his glory (κλέος) will be destroyed. He will lose his opportunity to demonstrate courage by facing death. By contrast, if he stays in Troy and fights, he will surely perish. His safe return (νόστος) will be destroyed, but his glory (κλέος) will be imperishable (ἄφθιτον). I will have much more to say about κλέος ἄφθιτον shortly, but before delving deeper into that specifically, it is worth looking at Achilles's difficulty. The whole story of the *Iliad* hinges on which of these two fates Achilles will choose.

A significant part of this dilemma is the fate of the dead. At death, Achilles will join the vast majority of humanity in descending to the underworld. This was the fate of almost all the

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<sup>28</sup> Hom., *Il.* 5.852.

<sup>29</sup> Hom., *Il.* 11.403-410.

dead; there was no promised Heaven or Hell. “When a person stops breathing - that is, dies - the *psychē*, the ‘life breath’ or soul, leaves the body through the mouth, never to return,”<sup>30</sup> according to Bart Ehrman. This “banal and purposeless existence after life” was dreary for everyone, “where souls (*psychai*) have the form but not the substance of human life, and none of its goodness ... There is nothing substantial or tangible about it. In that state, forever and ever, it does not experience any physical torment or pain - or pleasure, either. Instead, the *psychē* exists as a mere ‘image’ or ‘shade’ (Greek: *eidōlon*) of the person.”<sup>31</sup>

These souls are a far cry from those characterized by Plato, and “have none of the intellectual or spiritual significance that [they] came to have for later Greeks and for the West ... it is simply an entity that, when it is in a human body, makes that body alive, and that, when a person is killed, departs to Hades; there it is a ghost, with no significant physical or mental existence.”<sup>32</sup> Much like conceptions of Sheol in the Hebrew Bible, characterization of life in the underworld for the ancient Greeks, according to noted scholar of Greek religion Jan Bremmer, was consistently “negative ... On the whole they are witless shades who lack precisely those qualities that make up an individual.”<sup>33</sup>

This understanding of the afterlife left very little for one to look forward to, even for the best of persons. Rewards for virtuous behavior were located in this world, in this lifetime. A similar understanding of rewards and punishments for one’s conduct can be seen in the Book of Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy 28, the blessings for obedience and warnings against disobedience are laid out in stark, this-worldly terms. There is no promised Heaven or Hell, but

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<sup>30</sup> Bart Ehrman, *Heaven and Hell* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), 37.

<sup>31</sup> Ehrman, *Heaven and Hell*, 37.

<sup>32</sup> Schein, *The Mortal Hero*, 68.

<sup>33</sup> Jan N. Bremmer, *The Early Greek Concept of the Soul* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 124.

assurance that, if Israel is obedient, their fields, their livestock, their children - all shall be fruitful. They shall be first among nations, and overcome all others in any conflict. The opposite is true for disobedience. This system is rooted in an understanding of life, similar in this respect to Homer's, where life is finite and death is final.

The problem in the *Iliad*, however, is that Achilles is not being rewarded for his courage and bravery. In fact, "Homer portrays Achilles as weeping more than any other character in the poem, first over the injustice he suffers at the hands of Agamemnon and the Achaians, and then, repeatedly, over the death of Patroclus."<sup>34</sup> Courage in battle is supposed to be rewarded with honor from those with whom one fights. It was an honor/shame culture, and virtuous acts like courage were to receive their reward in the form of honor bestowed by one's peers. The honor that one was to receive for virtue

is not merely an abstraction. The basic meaning of *timē*, 'honor,' is 'price' or 'value' in a tangible sense. The word can be used of a woman like Briseis, who was a *geras* or special 'gift of honor' from the army to Achilles, as well as of the seat of honor, full wine goblets, meats, and fertile land mentioned by Sarpedon as rewards for prowess in battle and reasons for continued bravery and achievement.<sup>35</sup>

But when the *Iliad* opens, Achilles's honor is being taken away from him. Agamemnon first refuses to return Chryseis, the daughter of a priest of Apollo, and then, when Apollo visits a plague upon the Greeks for Agamemnon's insolence, Agamemnon decides he will return the girl after all, but take Achilles's gift of Briseis for himself. Agamemnon refuses to cede any honor, even to the gods. He requires Achilles to do so in his stead. Achilles, faced with the prospect of losing his honor, explodes with anger. He "explains here that he is responding, not only to Agamemnon's threat to take his prize away, but also to his entire rule over the past nine years ...

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<sup>34</sup> Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 135.

<sup>35</sup> Schein, *The Mortal Hero*, 71.

The fundamental problem with Agamemnon's rule is that it is unjust, so unjust that it is unreasonable for any of the Achaians to obey him."<sup>36</sup> It is unjust because Agamemnon refuses to give honor to those who deserve it, such as Achilles. This creates the tension in Achilles's conception of virtue noted above. Achilles makes sacrifices, spending ten years away from his home, suffering greatly, all for a war he did not start and has no need to fight. He is living, by the standard he knows, a virtuous life. However, he also wants to insist that the life of virtue must be advantageous somehow. Otherwise, what would motivate virtuous behavior? The virtuous life, in the mind of Achilles, must combine "both self-sacrifice and self-fulfillment."<sup>37</sup>

This difficulty is further compounded by the need for the honor to be freely bestowed. This is the problem that arises in Book Nine, when Agamemnon sends messengers to Achilles bearing extravagant gifts and promising him that he will be honored as a god. The offer is contingent, however, on Achilles returning to the battlefield to fight. Because the honor is not being freely given, it is not satisfactory to Achilles. It "falls short of genuine honor because, unlike genuine honor, unlike gratitude, it is contingent and self-serving. Rather than thank him for the tremendous services he has rendered, rather than selflessly recognize his generosity and courage, the Achaians transparently offer him honors and gifts in the hope that he will proceed to save them from the terrible destruction they face."<sup>38</sup> If honor is given out of duty or as a requirement, then it is not real honor in the mind of Achilles. It is a payment for services rendered. Achilles wants honor that is freely bestowed, a fair acknowledgement of his bravery and prowess in battle. But the honor also *must* be given, otherwise, why not choose to live a

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<sup>36</sup> Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 138.

<sup>37</sup> Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 141.

<sup>38</sup> Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 150.



long, safe, quiet life somewhere far from the battlefields of war? Honor, therefore, is to be freely given but also is required to sustain this particular motivation for courage.

This problem is severe enough that “Achilles’ doubts about the goodness of the life of virtue lead to the conclusion that one should abandon that life in favor of devoting oneself to pursuing one’s own good,”<sup>39</sup> hardly a conclusion any promoter of virtue would be comfortable with! Interestingly, this problem does not get cleanly resolved, at least not in a theoretical sense, in the *Iliad*. It is only when Ajax appeals to friendship that Achilles relents and decides to stay, although not to fight. And what finally brings Achilles back to the battlefield is not any honor given to him by the Greek armies, but the death of Patroclus. He loved Patroclus, and sat on the sidelines while Patroclus fought the Trojans in his armor and was killed by Hector. This is what brings Achilles back - his love and obligation to his friend. He knows that if he truly loved Patroclus, he cannot just stand by while his killer remains alive. The bonds of friendship bring Achilles back to the battle.

### **Κλέος ἄφθιτον**

Beyond the bonds of friendship, what reason is given for courageous behavior in Homer? One important answer is that, in the ancient Greco-Roman world, courage in the face of death could be rewarded with κλέος ἄφθιτον, or imperishable glory. This glory refers to “what is said about [the virtuous] near and far, even when they are dead.”<sup>40</sup> For the first two thirds of the epic, Achilles refuses to fight and contemplates leaving, thereby choosing the first of the two fates described above. But the death of his closest companion, Patroclus, spurs him into action. He

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<sup>39</sup> Ahrens Dorf, *Homer on the Gods and Human Virtue*, 153.

<sup>40</sup> Schein, *The Mortal Hero*, 71.

goes and fights, choosing κλέος ἄφθιτον over his own life. And κλέος ἄφθιτον he received, in the form of the *Iliad*, which is still being discussed and read in the present day. Gregory Nagy writes, “The main hero of the *Iliad* leaves as his signature the *kleos* of his own epic, which turns out to be the *Iliad* ... Achilles the hero gets included in the *Iliad* by dying a warrior’s death. The consolation prize for his death is the *kleos* of the *Iliad*.”<sup>41</sup> Andrei Zavaliy notes that “in the final analysis, a Homeric hero acts bravely and risks his life ... to gain glory.”<sup>42</sup>

The glory gained in battle was believed to live on in perpetuity. As the story goes, “Achilles will choose the glory of epic song, which is a thing of art, over his own life, which is a thing of nature. The thing of art is destined to last forever, while his own life, as a thing of nature, is destined for death.”<sup>43</sup> The “thing of nature” is transient and temporary, but the “thing of art” is not. By choosing a heroic death, Achilles gained “the glory of the hero as conferred by epic ... Achilles chooses *kleos* over life itself, and he owes his heroic identity to this *kleos*.”<sup>44</sup> His continuing heroic identity, the feature that allows him to have imperishable glory, both depends on and is in fact the *Iliad*. This is also what will happen, according to Telemachus, with Orestes. By getting revenge upon Aigisthos, who murdered his father Agamemnon, his reward will be that “the Achaians / will carry his glory far and wide, a theme for the singers / to come.”<sup>45</sup>

Nagy argues that “in a song culture, the song can be just as real as life itself.”<sup>46</sup> For the heroes depicted in the *Iliad*, its story and poetic song are “just as real to its heroes as their very own lives are real to them. For Achilles, the major hero of the *Iliad*, the song of *kleos* is just as

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<sup>41</sup> Gregory Nagy, *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 26-27.

<sup>42</sup> Zavaliy, *Courage and Cowardice in Ancient Greece*, 31.

<sup>43</sup> Nagy, *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours*, 29.

<sup>44</sup> Nagy, *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours*, 39.

<sup>45</sup> Hom., *Od.* 3.203-205. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the *Odyssey* are from *The Odyssey of Homer*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).

<sup>46</sup> Nagy, *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours*, 29.

real as his very own life is real to him. The infinite time of the artificial song, the *kleos aphthiton* or ‘imperishable glory’ ... is just as real to him as the finite time of his natural life.”<sup>47</sup> While he can only live for a short time and death will come for him, as it does for us all, Achilles can live on forever through the *Iliad*, thereby giving him a glory that is imperishable and unfading.

Gregory Riley notes that κλέος ἄφθιτον “was communicated especially through poetic song, the rehearsal by bards of the ideals of culture and the great deeds of ancestors. This form of immortality was important throughout the Greco-Roman period.”<sup>48</sup>

To link back to the prior discussion of mortality, it is just this mortality that drives one to seek κλέος ἄφθιτον. Andrei Zavaliiy says it well:

Glory is eternal while humans are not. To be glorified is to ensure that one’s name is not lost in the feared Lethe, the river of forgetfulness. Glory is a way of confronting and defying the tragic fact of mortality. Heroes can secure their continuous existence only through courageous behavior and, often, untimely death during war. It is this unique potential that allows finite humans to transcend their limited nature and to approach the state of the immortal gods.<sup>49</sup>

To illustrate this point, he highlights Sarpedon’s speech to Glaucus in Book XII of the *Iliad*:

Man, supposing you and I, escaping this battle,  
would be able to live on forever, ageless, immortal,  
so neither would I myself go on fighting in the foremost  
nor would I urge you into the fighting where men win glory.  
But now, seeing that the spirits of death stand close about us  
in their thousands, no man can turn aside nor escape them,  
Let us go on and win glory for ourselves, or yield it to others.<sup>50</sup>

From a modern point of view, according to Zavaliiy, this seems counterintuitive. One might suppose that, because life is fleeting and death the end of any meaningful existence, one should

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<sup>47</sup> Nagy, *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours*, 29.

<sup>48</sup> Gregory J. Riley, *Resurrection Reconsidered* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 25-26.

<sup>49</sup> Zavaliiy, *Courage and Cowardice in Ancient Greece*, 33.

<sup>50</sup> Hom., *Il* 12.322-328.

attempt to prolong it. But this is not so according to Sarpedon. Courage in battle allowed one to transcend their own mortality and live on forever in the memory of the *polis*.

Furthermore, this was not merely hypothetical but very much a lived reality for the people of ancient Greece. By the seventh century BCE, as explained in a previous chapter, hero cults “were enjoying rapid growth and becoming a significant element in the social and religious life of the Greeks.”<sup>51</sup> In fact, in the subsequent centuries “it might even have overshadowed the worship of the traditional gods among the ordinary Greeks.”<sup>52</sup> Fuqua writes, “However conspicuous their worship of the Olympians, the archaeological as well as literary evidence suggests that the Greeks had stronger emotional ties to hero worship.”<sup>53</sup> In other words, all around them, every day, citizens of the ancient Greco-Roman world were constantly being reminded of heroes who had died in battle. Their κλέος really did seem to be imperishable. The Greek poet Tyrtaeus, writing after Homer, said the following about Spartans who fight bravely in war:

And he who so falls among the champions and loses his sweet life,  
 so blessing with honor his city, his father, and all his people,  
 with wounds in his chest, where the spear that he was facing has  
 transfixed  
 that massive guard of his shield, and gone through his breastplate as  
 well,  
 why, such a man is lamented alike by the young and the elders,  
 and all his city goes into mourning and grieves for his loss.  
 His tomb is pointed to with pride, and so are his children,  
 and his children’s children, and afterward all the race that is his.  
 His shining glory is never forgotten, his name is remembered,  
 and he becomes an immortal, though he lies under the ground,  
 when one who was a brave man has been killed by the furious War God  
 standing his ground and fighting hard for his children and land.  
 But if he escapes the doom of death, the destroyer of bodies,  
 and wins his battle, and bright renown for the work of his spear,

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<sup>51</sup> Charles Fuqua, “Tyrtaeus and the Cult of Heroes,” *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 22, no. 3 (1981): 224.

<sup>52</sup> Zavaliy, *Courage and Cowardice in Ancient Greece*, 58.

<sup>53</sup> Fuqua, “Tyrtaeus and the Cult of Heroes,” 223.

all men give place to him alike, the youth and the elders,  
 and much joy comes his way before he goes down to the dead.  
 Aging, he has reputation among his citizens. No one  
 tries to interfere with his honors or all he deserves;  
 All men withdraw before his presence, and yield their seats to him,  
 the youth, and the men his age, and even those older than he.  
 Thus a man should endeavor to reach this high place of courage  
 with all his heart, and, so trying, never be backward in war.<sup>54</sup>

There was nothing to be feared for the brave man from this point of view. If he is victorious, he will be honored by all for the rest of his life. If he dies, he will become immortal, although lying under the ground. The only way one truly loses is through cowardice. Courage became equivalent to a code of conduct for the Spartans, forbidding them from fleeing and requiring that they stand and fight, no matter the odds.

Κλέος is so important that it even seems to supplant the actual reason for the Trojan War. Much more attention is given to the idea of κλέος in the *Iliad* than is paid to the reason for the fighting. The judgment of Paris is only alluded to, and not until Book XXIV. This is not an omission however, as the audience would likely have known the story beforehand, and more importantly, achieving victory is less important to each participant than achieving κλέος. Hector knows that, by going to fight, he will die. His son will be fatherless and Andromache will lose her husband. But he cannot bear the shame of not fighting; there is glory to be gained.

But aside from a legacy left behind with children and κλέος ἄφθιτον, there was little to look forward to in death. And there seems to have been a serious crisis of faith occurring in Greek religion regarding κλέος ἄφθιτον, even as early as Homer. For while Achilles chooses κλέος ἄφθιτον in the *Iliad*, he regrets this decision in the *Odyssey*. In Book XI, Odysseus travels to the underworld and comes across the shade of Achilles. Achilles wonders what could possibly

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<sup>54</sup> Tyrtaeus, "The Spartan Creed," in *Greek Lyrics*, 2nd ed., trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), <https://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/pdf/2013/254211.pdf>.

have possessed him to want to visit that place, and Odysseus says Achilles should not be bitter at death. But Achilles responds:

O shining Odysseus, never try to console me for dying  
I would rather follow the plow as thrall to another  
man, one with no land allotted him and not much to live on,  
than be a king over all the perished dead.<sup>55</sup>

This is a striking admission! The underworld is such a dismal place, that it is better to struggle and suffer upon the earth than to be lord in the underworld. Armed with this knowledge, it is difficult to imagine this more knowledgeable version of Achilles willingly choosing to sacrifice his life upon the earth, choosing an early death, simply for the sake that his memory will live on. Death is so bad that he would go back and live on in a wholly unremarkable way than be among the dead any longer.

### **Elysium**

There were, as always, exceptions to the rule that everyone descends to the underworld, and Elysium was that exception. “Elysium and the Isles of the Blessed functioned to grant a happy afterlife to a distinguished few in early Greek eschatology,”<sup>56</sup> writes Richard Miller. Not all heroes went there but for some Zeus granted a place to live at the ends of the earth, on the Isles of the Blessed, where they lived without sorrow in their hearts (ἀκηδέα θυμὸν ἔχοντες).<sup>57</sup> Menelaus, for example, is granted life in the Elysian Fields, a place where life goes on with ease and the weather is always beautiful, not because of any particular merit on his part but because of his status as a divine son-in-law.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Hom., *Od.* 11.488-491.

<sup>56</sup> Richard C. Miller, *Resurrection and Reception in Early Christianity* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 28.

<sup>57</sup> Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 170.

<sup>58</sup> Hom., *Od.* 4.634-635.

Other heroes such as Heracles earned a status that granted them apotheosis. He of course won for himself κλέος ἄφθιτον, with a name that may mean “one with the glory of Hera.” Hera provided the divine opposition, and so the κλέος of Heracles came about through overcoming the obstacles she placed before him. For “without the disequilibrium brought about by the persecution of Hērā, Hēraclēs would never have achieved the equilibrium of immortality and the *kleos* or ‘glory’ that makes his achievements live forever in song.”<sup>59</sup>

But Heracles accomplished so much, in such grueling testing, that he also won for himself the prize of immortality (οἷς διὰ τὸ μέγεθος ἔπαθλον ἦν ἡ ἀθανασία).<sup>60</sup> He slew many monsters, he captured others alive, he fought the Amazons, he even descended to the underworld and brought back Cerberus. As a result, he does not simply descend to the underworld as a shade, but is divinized as a hero and as a god. Gregory Riley notes that Heracles “was worshiped as both hero and god all over the Mediterranean world ... The prize for which Heracles had labored was immortality, and when he threw himself on the pyre in agony, the fire was said to have burned away his mortal nature and rendered him immortal.”<sup>61</sup> Another interpretation is provided by Gregory Nagy, who links Heracles immortality not to the pyre but to being struck by a thunderbolt from Zeus. He writes, “the thunderbolt of Zeus ... simultaneously destroys and regenerates: Elysium, one of many different names given to an imagined paradisiacal place of immortalization for heroes after death, is related to the word *en-ēlusion*, which designates a place struck by lightning - a place made sacred by contact with the thunderbolt of Zeus.”<sup>62</sup> Regardless of the exact process, there is no disagreement that Heracles was divinized, and that this happened

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<sup>59</sup> Nagy, *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours*, 37.

<sup>60</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, IV.8.1.

<sup>61</sup> Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*, 57-58.

<sup>62</sup> Nagy, *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours*, 36.

as a result of his faithful suffering through the trials placed before him. Diodorus emphasizes throughout his narration of the story of Heracles that it was on account of his exceedingly great excellence or goodness that he was granted immortality (διὰ τὴν ὑπερβολὴν τῆς ἀρετῆς ὁμολογουμένην αὐτῷ συγχωρῆσαι τὴν ἀθανασία).<sup>63</sup>

In the *Odyssey* Odysseus is able to see the image of Heracles in Hades as well, while acknowledging that the real person is with the immortal gods.<sup>64</sup> While “it’s not clear exactly how Heracles can be two places at once, ... apparently his mortal self has the fate of shades while his immortal person - his real being - is having a grand ol’ time in marital bliss at the heavenly banquets.”<sup>65</sup> Heracles is both present in the underworld and not present.

After his death, Zeus persuades Hera to adopt Heracles as her son and to give him his proper honor forever. She even re-enacts his birth, pulling him close to her and then allowing him to fall through her garments, simulating some of the movements associated with birth.<sup>66</sup> One could say that Heracles was born once on earth and then was born a second time, this time from above. It is “birth by Hērā [that] is the hero’s rebirth, a birth into immortality.”<sup>67</sup>

So some heroes received quite substantial rewards. But on the whole, “Elysium had few inhabitants: only a small number were related to Zeus or offspring of some other deity.”<sup>68</sup> For the rest, however, “the prize was an uncertain remembrance of bravery among our friends and family, or perhaps nothing at all.”<sup>69</sup> This ultimately provides an unsatisfying ending to the hero story. The options in the afterlife seem disconnected from notions of justice or mercy. Almost

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<sup>63</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, IV.8.5.

<sup>64</sup> Hom., *Od.* 11.90-93.

<sup>65</sup> Ehrman, *Heaven and Hell*, 43.

<sup>66</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, IV.39.2.

<sup>67</sup> Nagy, *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours*, 36.

<sup>68</sup> Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*, 57.

<sup>69</sup> Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*, 58.



everyone, no matter how just or how difficult their life, experiences the same fate in the underworld. The much happier place of Elysium seems reserved for Zeus's family members. Heracles was said to have earned his place, but he also was an offspring of Zeus. And, strikingly, no mention of Menelaus's virtue is made when explaining why he will be going. As will be explored shortly, many people simply require more assurance of a blessed afterlife in order to inspire acts of selfless courage and martyrdom.

### **Honor, Death, and the Heroic Life in the Gospel of Mark**

As we have seen, the desire to be acknowledged for one's heroism, to be seen as "the best of the Achaeans," drives much of the plot of the *Iliad*. Precisely the opposite drives the Gospel of Mark, and accounts for part of his unique take on what a hero should be.

Unlike the *Iliad*, and despite living in an honor/shame culture, Jesus seemingly cares little about his own honor or reputation. He is "amazed" at the lack of faith or honor he receives in his hometown of Nazareth, but he responds by helping whom he can and continuing his journey (Mark 6:1-7). This lack of honor does not become the centerpiece of the story, as it does in the *Iliad*. Jesus never insists upon his own honor, and those who seek honor and glory for themselves, like the disciples, are depicted as missing Jesus's message completely.

This becomes a major theme throughout the Gospel of Mark. The disciples of Jesus are consistently portrayed as wanting power, glory, and fame. They are expecting him, as the Messiah, to establish his Kingdom in Jerusalem, expelling the Romans and seating them, as his closest followers, in the places of honor in God's eternal Kingdom. He is first identified as the Messiah by Peter in Chapter 8, but this immediately turns out to be a false confession. For when Jesus tells Peter what actually happens to the Messiah, that he suffers and dies, he is rebuked by

Peter. That is not, after all, what anyone thought the Messiah would do. The Messiah was to be powerful, mighty, and victorious. Not so, according to Jesus. Jesus even goes so far as to refer to Peter as “Satan” in response and says he has his mind set on human things. This would have come as news to Peter, “for they are the Old Testament promises of a restored nation of Israel and a renewed kingdom of David.”<sup>70</sup> For Jesus here, even this promise is tainted by the sinful desire for power and glory on the part of those who seek it.

Jesus again foretells his death and resurrection in Chapter 9, and the text says the disciples “did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him” (Mark 9:32). Their ignorance is further emphasized as, immediately following this, Jesus asks them “What were you arguing about on the way” (9:33)? They are too embarrassed to admit that they had been arguing about which one of them would be the greatest in Jesus’s coming Kingdom. They still fail to understand that Jesus is not about power or honor. So he tells them a third time about his upcoming death in the following chapter, and James and John finally respond by asking him a question. The reader may find themselves at this point hoping that, finally, the disciples are understanding and will ask a helpful follow-up question. But rather than that, they instead ask him to “appoint us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory” (Mark 10:37). They still believe that this is going to be about gaining power, honor, and political victory for themselves. When James and John ask for these places of honor in the Age to come, Jesus responds, “whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:43b-45). Jesus’s focus is

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<sup>70</sup> Gregory J. Riley, *The River of God* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 162.

consistently on serving others in a truly selfless way, all the way to the point of death, which will happen as a “ransom for many.”

Another sign of their continual misunderstanding comes soon after, as Jesus sits down by the Temple treasury. He sees a poor widow putting in two small copper coins, and Jesus remarks “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on” (12:43-44). After this incredibly profound moment celebrating the widow for giving out of her poverty, the disciples immediately become distracted by all the trappings of wealth around them, saying, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings” (13:1)! They are still in awe of the stature of the buildings and the Temple, while Jesus is impressed with the poor widow.

Jesus can furthermore be found in the company of sinners (Mark 2:17), and in his teaching he diminishes the importance of the purity codes, preferring rather to focus on what is inside a person, their heart or character (Mark 7:14-23). For Jesus, the location “of purity/impurity [is] not the ‘body’ but the ‘heart.’”<sup>71</sup> Ched Myers has noted that Jesus attacks the purity code from the very beginning of the Gospel when he heals a leper in the first chapter. Myers writes that “the essence of the extensive regulations regarding leprosy (see Lv 13:2-14:57) was (1) the disease is communicable and (2) a priest must preside over ritual cleansing. Both principles are challenged in this episode ... In responding to the leper’s request, Jesus appears to be defying Torah and assuming the priestly prerogative ... Not only that, but Mark makes a point of emphasizing that Jesus *touched* the leper.”<sup>72</sup> Marcus Borg has noted that “leprosy excluded

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<sup>71</sup> Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 220.

<sup>72</sup> Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 152-153.

one from human community because it rendered one unclean, and everything touched by a leper became unclean. For Jesus to touch a leper ought to have involved defilement, just as in touching a corpse.”<sup>73</sup> But rather than Jesus being overcome with uncleanness or even leprosy, the leper is healed. Jesus demonstrates little concern that a lack of adherence to the purity codes and spending time with sinners will corrode his honor or his health. Jesus’s declaring of all foods clean

climaxes his assault upon the purity code, which Jesus began by ‘declaring clean’ the leper back in 1:41ff. Booth points out that the ‘medical’ argument - that food cannot defile because it passes through as excrement - is ‘Hellenistic,’ not Palestinian, for purity was a symbolic, not physiological, matter ... [Jesus] grants the medical argument ... precisely *because* he rejects the definition of purity given by the symbolic order.<sup>74</sup>

Furthermore, he “does not do these works of power in order to demonstrate that he is the anointed one. Rather, his works are the expression of his compassion to bring the wholeness of the rule of God to those who are ‘like sheep without a shepherd.’”<sup>75</sup> Indeed, most often his healings come accompanied with admonitions not to tell anyone that are consistently ignored. He seems less worried about being acknowledged than he is about teaching and meeting the needs of others. All that qualifies individuals for Jesus’s assistance is that they have needs. He

heals freely, with no strings attached for those being healed. He does not demand that they believe he is the anointed one (and no one does) or even that they believe in the God of the Judeans (the Syrophoenician woman does not). He does not require a person to be morally good, and he interprets the desire for healing as an indication of turning to God. Jesus does not expect to gain personally from healing; he does not broker his healing for worldly status or power.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Marcus Borg, *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (New York: Continuum International, 1998), 147.

<sup>74</sup> Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 220.

<sup>75</sup> David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 108-109.

<sup>76</sup> Rhoads et al., *Mark as Story*, 109.

In sharp contrast to the central conflict of the *Iliad*, with Achilles demanding to receive his proper honor for his share of service, Jesus rejects that completely. In fact, he would rather people *not* know about his acts of service.

Jesus consistently acknowledges the importance of honoring others, including one's parents (Mark 7:10-13), and he extends the reach of that commandment to "whoever does the will of God." All those who do the will of God are family and should be honored as family. But he cannot be found insisting on his own honor, a marked contrast from Achilles throughout most of the *Iliad*.

In a major shift from the *Iliad*, the laudable characters in the Gospel of Mark are, with the exception of Jesus and a few others, unnamed. Gregory Riley writes, "*None* of the characters who are positive role models in the Gospel of Mark has a name. The 'big names' - the disciples and famous women - are all failures when it comes to faith."<sup>77</sup> The poor widow, with "her low status and the smallness of her gift," exemplifies that "she does not give for recognition or reward; in fact, she is unaware of being noticed."<sup>78</sup> Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie note that "in general, the minor characters show no concern to be great or to exert power or to acquire wealth, concerns that would inhibit their efforts to meet another's need."<sup>79</sup> The minor characters "have several typifying traits: an openness to Jesus, a persistent faith, humility, a disregard for personal status and power, and a capacity for service."<sup>80</sup> They serve as a contrast with the disciples, who constantly misunderstand and seek honor and glory for themselves. Riley notes that "it is the

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<sup>77</sup> Riley, *The River of God*, 164.

<sup>78</sup> Rhoads et al., *Mark as Story*, 132.

<sup>79</sup> Rhoads et al., *Mark as Story*, 132.

<sup>80</sup> Rhoads et al., *Mark as Story*, 131.

humble, the meek - those who genuinely and from the heart seek after and serve God with all they have - who are the heroes in Mark's Gospel."<sup>81</sup>

However, as was demonstrated above, honor served as the means by which people attained some measure of life after death, living on in epics like the *Iliad* and in local cult devotions scattered throughout the empire. What is to motivate honorable, courageous behavior if one is truly to be unconcerned about one's reputation? Surely at least part of the answer remains the same as it did in the *Iliad*. The stories of saints who gave their lives for the faith were preserved and passed down in the Christian community, and the veneration of relics associated with the saints seems to have begun early as well. For example, in Acts, Paul's "handkerchiefs or aprons which had touched his skin" were believed to have special power (Acts 19:12). The memory of the dead lived on in the community.

However, a more radical solution was offered in Jesus's preaching of the Kingdom of God. One need not settle the debate about the eschatological character of the historical Jesus to acknowledge that, in the Gospel of Mark, the Kingdom of God is something near, at hand, that can be lived into in the present and more fully in the Age to Come. The present is predominantly marked by suffering, and one can live into the Kingdom of God primarily by following the ethic of service put forth by Jesus. In the Gospel of Mark, a teacher of the law asked Jesus what the greatest commandment was and agreed with his answer about loving God and loving others, for these are "much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." Jesus replies to him, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God" (Mark 12:33-34). This insight has brought him close to the Kingdom in all its glory. But, as in other hero stories generally, Mark takes great pains to emphasize the element of suffering. The last images we see of Jesus are his being

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<sup>81</sup> Riley, *The River of God*, 165.

forsaken by God, executed, taken off the cross and buried. There is nothing triumphalist about life in the present age. But in the Age to Come, things will be substantially different. In contrast to the dominant view of the afterlife as a dismal and insubstantial place, Jesus promises to change the bleak but universal fate of humanity. This was a “new teaching” for many who heard his message, “new wine” requiring “new wineskin” (Mark 1:27, 2:22). The fate of those who follow Jesus will mean a future where

they would be given a glorified, immortal existence comparable to that of the angels ... The resurrection of the dead meant being given an exalted existence for all eternity; it would not be a mere replication of life people have now in this world of sin and suffering. It would be like the lives of God’s powerful and glorious angels, an eternal life blessed by God in a world where there would no longer be any traces of evil.<sup>82</sup>

It would be a future where they would bear much fruit, “thirty and sixty and a hundredfold” (Mark 4:20). Those who partake in it will be those who are like mustard seeds, “the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade” (Mark 4:31-32). The reference to being sown here seems likely to be a reference to death, and after death one blossoms forth, as in 1 Corinthians 15:36-37. It will be hard for the wealthy and powerful to enter into it, as they are too attached to the things of this world. But for those who do enter, they will “receive a hundredfold now in this age - houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions - and in the age to come eternal life” (Mark 10:30). Jesus of course cannot literally mean people will receive multiple mothers here on earth, so this seems to be a reference to the Church community, a life lived together with those who are about to inherit eternal life. But one can see how loath Mark is to let too much triumphalist rhetoric into his work

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<sup>82</sup> Ehrman, *Heaven and Hell*, 162.

- he cannot even conclude a thought about the benefits of the Kingdom without also mentioning that one should expect persecution.

Paul Tillich characterizes the era in which the Gospel of Mark was written as one predominantly consumed by an anxiety over fate and death.<sup>83</sup> The Middle Ages is characterized more by anxiety over guilt and condemnation, and the modern era by the anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness. But the freedom from death was seen as a primary benefit of the Christian life in the earliest period. One was promised a glorious future, the same future given to Jesus. Unlike Elysium though, whose ranks were few, this offer was open to anyone who followed the way of Jesus. One can perhaps see the outworking of this conception in other writings. Just as Elysium was open to Zeus's family members, we are adopted into the family of God according to Paul (Galatians 4:4-7), and just as that benefit is bestowed thanks to the circumstances of birth for Elysium, one can be "born again" or "born from above" according to the Gospel of John (3:1-6). This is not fleshed out in much detail in the Gospel of Mark however. But what is clear is that Jesus was believed one day to "destroy the evil powers in control of this world and establish a great, utopian, and eternal kingdom. Those who lived as God wanted them to - loving their neighbors as themselves, doing good for others in need - would enter into that kingdom."<sup>84</sup>

Jesus shows his power over death throughout the Gospel of Mark. Indeed, it is one of its dominating themes. All of Jesus's miracles of healing demonstrate his power over the forces of death, as does his raising of the dead and vanishing from the tomb himself after his crucifixion and burial. And he gives instructions on how others can share in his power over death: "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake

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<sup>83</sup> Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 57.

<sup>84</sup> Ehrman, *Heaven and Hell*, 167.



of the gospel, will save it.” Jesus’s advice to save one’s life is to lose their life for the sake of the gospel. Their body might perish, but the person would live on. The willingness to lose one’s life for the sake of Jesus and the Gospel is how one partakes in the fate of Jesus the hero. Jesus, although tempted, refused to be a coward and endured what God placed before him. Likewise, Jesus instructs his followers that the one “who endures to the end will be saved” (Mark 13:13). One must be willing to endure hardship and trials, even to the point of death. But the one who shares in Jesus’s suffering will also share in his future glory. Gregory Riley notes,

The contrast with older ways of understanding human life could not be greater. If one sacrificed one’s life in the old monistic cultures, one died, went to the underworld, and was gone forever; long life was one of the promised rewards for a righteous life. Now the most righteous person ever (in Christian conception) is not only sacrificing his own life in his early thirties, but teaching others to do the same, saying that such sacrifice is the only way to survive death.<sup>85</sup>

This power over death would be fully manifest in the Kingdom of God that Jesus would be inaugurating soon, within the generation in which Mark was written. The coming of the Kingdom of God would be a dramatic, world-altering event, preceded by the events Jesus talks about in Mark 13, including the destruction of the Temple. But then something new would be inaugurated. The followers of Jesus would have

bodies like those of the angels. One may assume from this and from the entire tradition about angels that whatever sort of bodies angels have, they are not bodies of earthly flesh, however upgraded. Thus [Mark’s] Jesus did not believe in resurrection of one’s original old flesh; indeed, he thought it important to teach the opposite to head off ridiculous ideas such as the question posed by his Sadducean opponents of people having sex in heaven.<sup>86</sup>

James Tabor makes a similar point when he writes, “Within the Jesus movement the resurrection of the dead at the end of the age was understood as the release of the dead from Sheol, or Hades,

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<sup>85</sup> Riley, *The River of God*, 163.

<sup>86</sup> Riley, *The River of God*, 156.

clothed in a new spiritual body no longer subject to death or decay. Resurrection involved transformation to a higher order of life, no longer differentiated as male and female, and thus no birth or death. The idea of resuscitating corpses or reassembling decayed flesh and bones long perished or turned to dust did not even enter the picture.”<sup>87</sup> For this reason, there is little emphasis on a physical resurrection in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus does not make an appearance in his resurrection body. His earthly body vanishes, and he has gone ahead to meet Peter and the rest of the disciples in Galilee, and that is all we are told.

Furthermore, “fundamental to the teaching of Jesus was the dualism of body and soul.”<sup>88</sup> He asks questions like what profit is there if one gains the whole world but loses their soul, and what can one even give in return for one’s soul (Mark 8:36-37). Sayings like “the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mark 14:38) make the most sense within a dualistic understanding of the human being. When Jesus is asked by someone how one can inherit eternal life, he answers “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me” (Mark 10:21). In other words, do not worry about the things of this world. Sell all of it. That will give one real treasure, treasure in heaven, which is everlasting. It is something one will inherit after death. According to Riley again, the material world and “all of its honors and blessings were not only transitory and subject to dissolution, but were deceptions that beguiled one into acceptance of a false set of values. The only reality and permanence was that of the spiritual world of the divine; that was the real origin and destiny of the soul.”<sup>89</sup> Long life was not a reward to be pursued anymore, because one’s life on earth was not the whole story. People are immortal souls; they are only occupying a body.

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<sup>87</sup> James D. Tabor, *Paul and Jesus* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 58.

<sup>88</sup> Riley, *The River of God*, 161.

<sup>89</sup> Riley, *The River of God*, 168.

That body could be lost, and if it was lost and the soul was judged to be righteous, one inherited eternal bliss. Important here is not just the moral component, but the anthropological dualism which undergirded this concept of life everlasting with God. Jesus reverses much of the Deuteronomic covenant (Deuteronomy 30:15-18) that promised wealth, health, safety, a long life, and many children for the righteous. Mark's Jesus, with his understanding of an immortal soul, could reject all of the above, because none of those things mattered in comparison to one's immortal soul. In teaching this, "it is hard to avoid the inference that Jesus was quite consciously contradicting the materialist and this-world orientation of the dominant religious and cultural norms of his day."<sup>90</sup> James Tabor does make the point that one receives a new body, which he distinguishes in terminology from the idea of an immortal soul.<sup>91</sup> He writes, "For Plato death is a friend, offering release from the prison of a mortal body, whereas for Jews and Christians death is an enemy that sends one to Sheol forever, until God intervenes and raises the dead in their new form."<sup>92</sup> This new form, however, will not be flesh and blood, but will be a spiritual existence in a spiritual body. The exact nuances of how one should distinguish a spiritual soul living with God after death for Plato and a spiritual body living with God after death for Paul and Mark is left unexplained. One may be forgiven for suspecting that the concepts could easily be conflated in the minds of the first hearers.

This understanding of a spiritual body Mark may have gleaned from the writings of Paul, who teaches something like this in 1 Corinthians 15. And that this glorious future was to be dramatically different from anything we have ever experienced before on earth was carried forward by certain segments of the Church. Jerome, writing about the Eastern Church, says

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<sup>90</sup> Riley, *The River of God*, 167.

<sup>91</sup> Tabor, *Paul and Jesus*, 59.

<sup>92</sup> James Tabor, *Paul and Jesus*, 59.

We believe, say they, in the resurrection of the body. This confession, if only it be sincere, is free from objection. But as there are bodies celestial and bodies terrestrial and as thin air and the ether are both according to their natures called bodies, they use the word body instead of the word flesh in order that an orthodox person hearing them say body may take them to mean flesh while a heretic will understand that they mean spirit (*Epistle* 84.5).

The Eastern Church continued forward this teaching of a spiritual resurrection where the fate of the body does not matter. Dionysius of Alexandria wrote in “On the Promises” about certain individuals who

put forward a treatise by Nepos, on which they rely completely as proving incontrovertibly that Christ’s kingdom will be on earth ... They do not allow our simpler brethren to have lofty noble thoughts, either about the glorious and truly divine epiphany of our Lord or about our own resurrection from the dead, when we shall be gathered together and made like him; they persuade them to expect in the kingdom of God what is trifling and mortal and like the present.

### **Implications**

Having established that the Gospel of Mark fits within the mold of Greco-Roman hero stories in previous chapters, and that this was likely intended by the author, it is now apparent that several changes to the model hero are made by that same author. The reward for heroism is no longer κλέος ἄφθιτον. In fact, those who desire κλέος ἄφθιτον are not fit to inherit the Kingdom. They are the disciples, shown as constantly missing the message of Jesus. Κλέος ἄφθιτον is rejected in favor of a bright afterlife that comes as a gift for a life filled with service to others. Mark overturns the Homeric motivation for heroism. All heroism will get one in this life is crucifixion. God does not come in at the end of the story to save Jesus - instead, Jesus is forsaken. But that is ok, because the Kingdom of God has been prepared for such as these. We never learn the name of the poor widow at the Temple, she never receives κλέος ἄφθιτον, but she is the model for all who come after to follow. We never learn the name of the woman who anointed Jesus for his burial, but her act of service is what matters most.

This can happen thanks to the revolution in thought surrounding the fate of the dead. One can forsake every thought of reward in this life, the search for honor that so occupied Achilles, because, if one follows Jesus the hero through acts of service all the way to the end, even to the point of death, one shares in his heroism and in his glorious fate with God the Father. God becomes our father when this happens, and we become part of the family of God. There is no suggestion of a Trinitarian God in the Gospel of Mark. What seems to make Jesus God's Son is the anointing given him in baptism that allows him to follow the will of God to the very end. That is the offer being made by the Church in baptism. The follower of Jesus can share in his baptism, his heroic life, and his resurrection of the dead, provided one embraces the crucifixion.

This is a radical adjustment to the mold of Greco-Roman hero stories. It alters the fundamental motivation as well as the reward. And by not including stories like the virgin birth, coupled with an emphasis on service and discipleship, Mark seems to be suggesting that we, too, can become the family members of God and thereby share in the fate that is given to God's own family.

### *Chapter Five: The Problem of Violence*

The problem of violence drives the *Iliad* and to a lesser extent the *Odyssey* as well. We have already examined the mixed feelings the *Iliad* manifests towards violence. It unapologetically embraces the heroic ideal while also calling into question its costs, and dares to ask whether the slaughter of innocents can ever be considered justifiable. The *Iliad* speaks quite positively of Hector, but it is Hector's fate to die, for his wife to be a widow and for his child to grow up fatherless. He will die as revenge for the death of Patroclus, who is himself fighting for the Achaeans who are there because of the actions of Paris, actions themselves despised by Hector. As Emily Wilson notes, "*The Iliad* suggests that 'good' and 'bad' kinds of conflict cannot be so easily disentangled. The desire to outdo rivals inspires brave, glorious actions, and also leads to massive loss of life. Battle is the 'sphere where men win glory' (*kydianeira*), but also where many lose their lives - so war is also 'the cause of many tears,' 'the cause of so much grief' (*polydakrytos, polystonos*)."<sup>1</sup> In the case of Hector, he unreservedly follows the "warrior code" even when it risks the life of his family. "For Hector," writes Wilson,

the priority is his own individual glory (*kleos*). Fighting alone, out ahead of all his fellow fighters, is his best chance of avoiding the pain of humiliation for himself - even if this prize is won at the cost of everything and everybody else ... To do what the nameless, perhaps partly imaginary Trojan women expect of a war hero, Hector must reject what his own people actually need. The collective desire to see a lone warrior act with glorious courage puts everyone at risk.<sup>2</sup>

The fighting may be

stained, like ivory, with beauty. We feel the joy of the spear at tasting human flesh, and the purely sensory details: the gleam of metal, the softness or wetness of the muscle and blood, the noisy clash of armor and bones as they hit the ground. The triumphant warrior demonstrates his creativity in finding, repeatedly,

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<sup>1</sup> Emily Wilson, *The Iliad* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2023), xxvi-xxvii.

<sup>2</sup> Wilson, *Iliad*, xxxiii.

new ways to unloose the ties that briefly tie together our short-lived human limbs.<sup>3</sup>

It is also immensely tragic, costly, and a waste of human potential. Can Jesus the hero find a better path, one that does not sacrifice its ideals but separates from the violence that attends the heroic life? In some ways, yes.

The story of the Gerasene demoniac is the longest and most developed exorcism story in any of the Gospel narratives. It would not be out of place in an action or horror movie today, featuring a dramatic exorcism of a crazed man with super-human strength who lives among the tombs, incredulous crowds, and stampeding and drowning animals. While compelling even when read at a surface level, this story is staggering in its depth of meaning and insight when one digs deeper. The story symbolizes many of the most important themes in Jesus' ministry and ethical teachings, most especially nonviolent opposition to political oppression and the power of compassion to overcome standards of purity. Jesus models, throughout the Gospel of Mark but perhaps most revealingly here and in the crucifixion, how to live a heroic life without falling into the trap of violence that ensnares so many in Homer.

Before diving into these insights, understanding how the story was constructed and functions in its broader literary context is necessary. Mark, as we have seen in previous chapters, was not writing in a vacuum, or merely reporting oral tradition faithfully, taking care to change nothing. Rather, this story may strategically imitate two other stories in Homer's *Odyssey*, which allows the reader to go beyond surface-level descriptions of Jesus's activity and evaluate how his actions can be favorably contrasted with those of Odysseus in a similar situation. An understanding of the geography of the region, and what exactly a Legion is, also adds depth to

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<sup>3</sup> Wilson, *Iliad*, xlv.

the story. This background knowledge will be explored first, before laying out the ethical implications of the story.

It should be noted here as well that my primary purpose in laying out these parallels is not to prove that Mark was imitating Homer. I think that is plausible given the similarities, but very little hangs upon this if the reader is unconvinced. Direct mimesis is difficult to prove to the satisfaction of all readers, given that any act of mimesis will feature points of similarity as well as differences, sometimes significant differences. All I want to insist upon is that these stories are so similar that comparing them is warranted.

### **Mark 5 and the *Odyssey***

In many ways Mark 5:1-20 follows the standard pattern of exorcism stories in the Gospel narratives. Jesus enters an area, meets a possessed individual, and then casts the demon out of the person. The exorcism often inspires a dramatic reaction in the person being delivered, and the people who observe the miracle are amazed. This story, however, is far more elaborate than any other exorcism narrative. It is the only one that is preceded by Jesus sailing to a particular area, and the demonization is described at considerable length. It is the only exorcism where Jesus asks the demon for his name, and in which the demons do not respond to Jesus' initial command, but rather negotiate favorable terms. The people in the area are not simply amazed but afraid, and ask Jesus to leave. The man who was healed also asks to follow Jesus, and Jesus refuses. All of these oddities are only found in this story.

Other features in the text seem awkward. Mark feels the need to stress three times that the demoniac lived among the tombs, and in the mountains. Mark also has to retroactively explain why the demoniac asks for Jesus not to torment him, as though he had forgotten to explain that



previously. The demoniac is described as being fully clothed after the exorcism, even though he was not described as nude beforehand. A herd is not the conventional term used for a group of pigs, and two-thousand is an exceedingly high number to find grazing in a single area. The swineherds and witnesses describe what happened to others twice. And the city of Gerasa, where the events are said to have occurred, was not a coastal city. It was over forty miles away from the Sea of Galilee.

Other scholars have tried to explain why this story demonstrates these unusual features. “Some interpreters,” writes Dennis MacDonald, “insist that these anomalies point to personal reminiscences of a historical event, others contend that the origin of the story had to do with a popular folktale or legend of another exorcist, and others suggest that a dramatic event later became embellished with legendary and novelistic elements and have proposed complex histories of transmission.”<sup>4</sup>

All of the textual anomalies can be explained, however, if one takes the Homeric stories of Polyphemus and, to a lesser but still important extent, Circe, as a literary model for Mark’s story. Bartosz Adamczewski even notes that “it is relatively easy to notice the hypertext correspondences between the Marcan story about Jesus’ meeting with a powerful Gerasene demoniac (Mk 5:1-20) and the Homeric stories about Odysseus’ meeting with the pagan Cyclops Polyphemus (*Od.* 9.181-542), as well as the transformation of Odysseus’ warriors into pigs (*Od.* 19.238-243),” even if Adamczewski does not believe all the antecedent texts for this story are found in Homer.<sup>5</sup> Polyphemus was a Cyclops, creatures who were “great favorites of Zeus. They were wonderful workmen and they forged his thunderbolts ... Zeus gave them a home in a

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<sup>4</sup> Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 64.

<sup>5</sup> Adamczewski, *The Gospel of Mark*, 73.

fortunate country where the vineyards and cornlands, unplowed and unsown, bore fruits plenteously. They had great flocks of sheep and goats as well, and they lived at their ease. Their fierceness and savage temper, however, did not grow less; they had no laws or courts of justice, but each one did as he pleased.”<sup>6</sup>

Odysseus and his crew sailed to the island of the Cyclops, attempting to return home to Ithaca after departing at the conclusion of the Trojan War. After disembarking, they enter a cave looking for food and hospitality. They brought wine with them as a gift to whoever extended them hospitality. The Cyclops Polyphemus, “hideous and huge,”<sup>7</sup> enters the cave shortly thereafter. Polyphemus was a popular character in Greek art, and was usually depicted nude. Odysseus attempts to be hospitable to Polyphemus, and mentions Zeus to him, but Polyphemus easily slaughters two members of Odysseus’ crew, smashing their brains against the ground, and begins to eat their flesh and bones. Odysseus is horrified, but cannot act right away, as Polyphemus has placed a large boulder in front of the cave entrance, a stone too heavy for them to move on their own. Polyphemus kills two more the next morning, in no apparent hurry, as he is bigger and stronger than any of them. Even if Odysseus and his companions were to succeed in killing him, they would die themselves, trapped in the cave, unable to remove the stone blocking the entrance.

So Odysseus hatches a plan, and gets Polyphemus drunk. When Polyphemus asks him for his name, he replies that his name is “Nobody.” When Polyphemus passes out, Odysseus and his men use a huge spike to puncture Polyphemus’ eye, making him blind. Polyphemus starts screaming, and the other Cyclops rush to his cave and ask what is going on. Polyphemus says

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<sup>6</sup> Edith Hamilton, *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes* (New York: Grand Central, 1942), 105-106.

<sup>7</sup> Hamilton, *Mythology*, 106.

that “Nobody” is blinding him, leading the other Cyclops to conclude he is being punished by Zeus. Polyphemus then removes the large stone and, using his hands, attempts to feel and then catch Odysseus and his crew as they exit the cave. Polyphemus’ sheep, however, are also exiting the cave, and Polyphemus feels them as they leave to make sure they are not carrying a man on their back. Odysseus and his men, however, have strapped themselves *beneath* the sheep, and thereby exit the cave without Polyphemus noticing.

When they finally are back aboard their ship, Polyphemus asks Odysseus to come back, promising him a gift. Odysseus responds by taunting Polyphemus, telling him that if anyone asks who has blinded him, to say that “you were blinded by Odysseus, sacker of cities, / Laertes is his father, and he makes his home in Ithaka.”<sup>8</sup> Polyphemus pronounces a curse upon Odysseus, and Poseidon, who was Polyphemus’ father, heard him, and he became “so angry that he swore Odysseus should reach his own country again only after long misery and when he had lost all his men.”<sup>9</sup> Poseidon’s anger would follow Odysseus for ten years. Immediately after leaving the Island of the Cyclops, they came to another country where Odysseus gets a bag containing storm winds. Odysseus’ crew makes the mistake of opening this bag, and the unleashed winds sink all of their ships except for the one Odysseus is on, and knocks them terribly off course.

After yet another misadventure on an island of cannibals, Odysseus comes to “the realm of Circe, a most beautiful and most dangerous witch.”<sup>10</sup> Odysseus’s crew investigates the land, and they discover Circe, who gives them something to drink. This drink is a magic potion that turns them all into swine. Only one member of the crew “had been too cautious to enter her

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<sup>8</sup> Hom., *Od.* 9.504-505.

<sup>9</sup> Hamilton, *Mythology*, 306.

<sup>10</sup> Hamilton, *Mythology*, 307.

house,”<sup>11</sup> and is able to escape and inform Odysseus. When Odysseus goes to confront Circe, he is met by Hermes, who gives him a cure to Circe’s magic potion. He then confronts Circe with his sword drawn. Circe, recognizing him as Odysseus, whom the gods had foretold would come, cries out and falls at his knees. She begs him not to hurt her, but rather to make love to her instead. Odysseus agrees, so long as she promises not to hurt him or his men. Circe reverts Odysseus’ men back into the form of men and not swine, and thereafter, “for all our days until a year was completed / we sat there feasting on unlimited meat and sweet wine.”<sup>12</sup> Finally, after a year, they depart from Circe and again attempt to head home.

The parallels between these two stories and Mark’s narrative of the Gerasene demoniac are quite extensive. They were first found by Dennis MacDonald, and the following chart, built on his work, attempts to summarize the primary parallels, favoring the story of Polyphemus, with the additional parallels with the story of Circe in parentheses.

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<sup>11</sup> Hamilton, *Mythology*, 307.

<sup>12</sup> Hom., *Od.* 10.467-468.

<b>Odyssey 9 and 10</b>	<b>Mark 5:1-20</b>
Odysseus and his crew sailed to the land of the Cyclopes (and of Circe).	Jesus and his disciples sailed to the region of the Gerasenes.
On the mountain of the Cyclopes “innumerable goats” grazed. (Circe turned Odysseus’s comrades into swine.)	On the mountains “a large herd of swine” grazed.
Odysseus and his crew disembarked.	Jesus and his disciples disembarked.
They encountered a savage, lawless giant who lived in a cave.	They encountered a savage, lawless demoniac who lived among the tombs.
Polyphemus usually was depicted nude.	The demoniac was nude.
<b>Odyssey 9 and 10</b>	<b>Mark 5:1-20</b>
(Circe recognized Odysseus and asked him not to harm her. Odysseus: “Swear to me an oath / not to plan another plot to hurt me.”) The giant asked if Odysseus had come to harm him.	The demoniac recognized Jesus and asked him not to harm him. “I adjure you by God, do not torment me.”
The giant asked Odysseus his name.	Jesus asked the demoniac his name.
Odysseus answered, “Nobody.”	The demoniac answered, “Legion.”
Odysseus subdued the giant with violence and trickery. (Circe had turned Odysseus’s soldiers into swine.)	Jesus subdued the demons with divine power and sent them into the swine and then into the lake.
The shepherd called out to his neighbors.	The swineherds called on their neighbors.
The Cyclopes came to the site asking about Polyphemus’s sheep and goats.	The Gerasenes came to the site to find out about their swine.
Odysseus and his crew embarked.	Jesus and his disciples embarked.
Odysseus told the giant to proclaim that he had blinded him.	Jesus told the healed demoniac to proclaim what God had done for him.
The giant asked Odysseus, now aboard the ship, to come back.	The demoniac asked Jesus, now aboard the ship, if he could be with him.
Odysseus refused the request.	Jesus refused the request.
Odysseus and his crew sailed away.	Jesus and his disciples sailed away.
Odysseus awoke during a tempest in the episode immediately following the story of the Cyclops.	Jesus awoke during a tempest and calmed the wind and sea just before casting out the demoniac.

Viewing this story as an intentional imitation of Homer explains many of the odd features in this story. It is the only story to be immediately preceded and followed by sailing on the sea because that is how the story proceeds in Homer. There were innumerable goats upon the mythical island of the Cyclopes, which may explain why there are two-thousand pigs in Mark's story (although another reason will be given further below). Mark also stresses three times that the demoniac lived among the tombs in the mountains because Mark wanted this to serve as a mimetic flag for the reader, who is supposed to imagine a crazed individual with super-human strength that lived among the tombs in caves. That mental picture would hopefully trigger the similar image from the *Odyssey*. When Circe begged Odysseus to have mercy upon her in the *Odyssey*, the reason was apparent in the story. Odysseus was at her throat with his sword. When Mark imitated this story, he had the demoniac begging for mercy, and then apparently realized that, unlike in the *Odyssey*, it is not obvious why the demoniac would need to beg before Jesus. So the retroactive explanation was provided. When the demoniac was healed, he appeared fully clothed, despite not having ever been described as nude. Polyphemus was usually depicted as nude, and clearly Mark had this image in his mind as he composed his narrative, even if he forgot to mention initially that the demoniac was also nude. The conversation with the demoniac parallels the conversation with Polyphemus, as does the final conversation that the now-healed demoniac has with Jesus as he is boarding his boat. Polyphemus also had a conversation with Odysseus while he was in his boat.

All told, this story has far more parallels with the *Odyssey* than it does with anything in the Hebrew Bible. The case is strengthened further when one realizes that the *Aeneid* likewise imitates this story to show Aeneas as being more compassionate than Odysseus. Aeneas comes across the island of the Cyclops as well, and encounters a soldier left behind by Odysseus. He

rescues this soldier, taking him on board his ship, and sails away before the Cyclopes can catch them.<sup>13</sup>

However, for my purposes, even if the reader remains unconvinced that Mark was imitating Homer here, the parallels seem significant enough to allow the stories to be fruitfully compared. One can easily imagine ancient readers seeing these parallels and, even if not positing a literary connection, comparing them to see the differences between a hero figure like Odysseus and one like Jesus.

### **Ethical Implications**

It is now possible to draw out some of the ethical implications of this story, although more background information will be provided later to continue mining the narrative. The first, and perhaps most obvious, ethical difference between these stories relates to the use of violence. Odysseus escapes from the clutches of Polyphemus using violence and deceit. While I imagine that most readers of the story, when faced with the actions of Polyphemus, hardly felt bad for him or thought the violence was unjustified, it was still an act of violence. Furthermore, Odysseus's violent behavior does not extend simply to escaping from Polyphemus. Even after escaping successfully, he starts taunting Polyphemus. This almost sinks the whole escape plan, as Polyphemus can then start hurling boulders in the direction of his voice, and he nearly downs their ships in the process. Odysseus's continuing anger, while certainly understandable, almost costs them their escape. Odysseus's rash behavior in providing his name allows Polyphemus to call down a curse upon him. Poseidon honors that curse, and this delays Odysseus's homecoming

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<sup>13</sup> MacDonald, *Synopses of Epic, Tragedy, and the Gospels* (Claremont, CA: Mimesis Press, 2022), 145.

by years. Polyphemus is left on the island, blind and without any of his livestock. In short, no one benefited from this encounter. There were no winners, only losers.

Jesus, however, does not resort to violence, for the Kingdom of God does not come through violence or coercive tactics, but through compassion and acts of healing. When confronted with the raging, superhumanly strong demoniac, he heals him. He casts the demon out, and when people see him next, he is calm, grateful, and clothed. Jesus solves his problems without using violence against others. Jesus is also known throughout the Gospel of Mark for refusing to gloat in his victories. While in this story he tells the healed man to go throughout the region and share his story, more often in this Gospel he instructs those he has healed not to tell anyone. Jesus never gloats, and frequently keeps his noble actions a secret. By healing and not attacking the demoniac, and by his refusal to boast, everybody leaves this encounter better than before. Jesus has gained his very “first Gentile missionary”<sup>14</sup> in the Gospel of Mark. The demoniac ends up significantly healthier than he started.

Jesus rejects what is known as the myth of redemptive violence. Walter Wink, who has written extensively on this topic, summarizes the content of this myth as “the story of the victory of order over chaos by means of violence. It is the ideology of conquest, the original religion of the status quo. The gods favor those who conquer. Conversely, whoever conquers must have the favor of the gods ... Religion exists to legitimate power and privilege. Life is combat. Any form of order is preferable to chaos.”<sup>15</sup> Violence is a way, perhaps the only way, of solving problems and obtaining safety, security, and a future. Furthermore, “the belief that violence ‘saves’ is so successful because it doesn’t seem to be mythic in the least. Violence simply appears to be the

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<sup>14</sup> Pheme Perkins, “The Gospel of Mark: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *New Testament Articles: Matthew-Mark*, vol. 8 of *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 584.

<sup>15</sup> Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 48.



nature of things. It's what works. It seems inevitable, the last and, often, the first resort in conflicts."<sup>16</sup> It is "the dominant myth in contemporary America,"<sup>17</sup> and is strongly tied to popular notions of what a Messiah should do in the ancient world. The Messiah must be more powerful than all our enemies, "an armed redeemer, someone who has the strength of character and conviction to transcend the legal restraints of ... institutions and save us from our enemies."<sup>18</sup>

It is appealing in part because it locates moral evil entirely in others and not as an always-present potential (or reality) in oneself. In the *Odyssey*, Polyphemus is evil, and Odysseus is therefore justified in doing whatever he must do to survive and escape. In much the same way, the Zealots identified Rome as the epitome of evil. They needed to be purged from the land; then all would be right again. Kill the evildoers and peace and prosperity will again descend upon Israel. In the story of the Gerasene demoniac, the person himself is not evil. In fact, he becomes an evangelist, proclaiming what great things Jesus had done for him. He turns out to be as occupied himself as is the nation of Israel at the time. He does not need to be locked away, imprisoned, or killed. He needs to be healed. When he is healed, not when he is destroyed, then the demonic system that was oppressing him would be undone.

This approach to overcoming evil is Mark's answer to the question posed in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* regarding the heroic life. Jesus bears all the hallmarks of a hero in this story. He is a warrior, and a skilled one. He brings even formidable opponents to their knees not long after encountering them. Jesus overcame the "monster" of Legion, something no one else was able to do. But he does so in a nonviolent way. He isolates the "monster" from the person underneath, driving out the monster but leaving the person in good health and fine spirits. He engages with

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<sup>16</sup> Wink, *The Powers That Be*, 42.

<sup>17</sup> Wink, *The Powers That Be*, 48.

<sup>18</sup> Wink, *The Powers That Be*, 50-51.

evil, but in a way that emphasizes the humanity of the person carrying out their evil and resolves the encounter with compassion, not violence. And as will be seen at the end of the Gospel, Jesus is willing to fight and die for his beliefs, enduring the fate of all heroes to suffer and die for their cause, but his way of fighting, his manner of resistance is different. It gives life, not destroys it.

### **What is a Legion?**

One problem, mentioned briefly above, with viewing this story as a report from oral tradition has to do with geography. Jesus sets sail and arrives in Gerasa. All of the action that follows takes place next to the sea, and concludes with Jesus getting back into his boat and sailing away. The city of Gerasa is not a coastal or port city; it is forty miles away from the Sea of Galilee, too far for the story to have occurred near there. It is possible that Mark intended “to establish ‘the other side of the sea’ as gentile socio-symbolic space. Thus he identified the country around Gerasa broadly as the Decapolis.”<sup>19</sup> Paul Verhoeven notes that others have tried to resolve this discrepancy by finding the village Mark actually intended, writing that “in around A.D. 900, Eutychius of Alexandria (*Book of Demonstration*, 137) reported that he and his contemporaries associated the Feeding of the Multitude and the healing of the man from Gerasenes who was possessed by ‘an unclean spirit’ (Mark 5:1-13) with one and the same location: the village of Kursi. This village did not exist in Jesus’ day.”<sup>20</sup> While a reference to the broader region of the Decapolis is possible, Mark knew the term Decapolis, and used it in 5:20. A more intentional reason is far more plausible, and connects to the term Legion.

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<sup>19</sup> Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 190.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Verhoeven, *Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Susan Massotty (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2010), 229.

The word Legion “had only one meaning in Mark’s social world: a division of Roman soldiers.”<sup>21</sup> The Roman Empire did not have a substantially large number of troops patrolling territories they had conquered and occupied, but they kept some around for emergency situations. These “legions” would be stationed in cities and ready to be deployed at a moment’s notice. “The Tenth Legion ... had been stationed [in Gerasa] since 6 CE,”<sup>22</sup> according to PHEME Perkins. When Mark says that Jesus confronts a Legion in the city of Gerasa, then, anyone in his day would have seen it as a very thinly-veiled story of confrontation with the “legions” of the Roman Empire. Not only that, this particular legion of troops in Gerasa “used the boar as a symbol on its standard,” thereby identifying them with the pigs in the story.<sup>23</sup> PHEME Perkins notes that “the imperial powers that controlled the region perceived themselves to be the source of civilization and peace. The local populace, faced with powers it could not resist, had a very different perception, regarding imperial power as oppressive.”<sup>24</sup>

So Jesus goes to Gerasa and has a confrontation with Legion, a clear allusion to the Roman Empire. This Legion lives among the dead, is not in its right mind, but is so strong no one can stop them on their own. But when Jesus arrives, the Legion runs up to Jesus and bows down before him. Not only that, but they ask Jesus not to send them out of the area! For Mark to depict (in an allusion) the forces of the Roman Empire bowing down before Jesus and begging him not to send them away is incredibly audacious. It is the kind of rhetoric that could easily have gotten him killed.

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<sup>21</sup> Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 191.

<sup>22</sup> Perkins, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, 584.

<sup>23</sup> Perkins, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, 584.

<sup>24</sup> Perkins, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, 584.

Jesus, however, is only enacting his mission of binding “the strong man,” first given in the parable in Mark 3:22-30. Jesus was an exorcist, and when challenged by scribal authorities as to the power behind his exorcisms, he responds that “no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered” (3:27). If Jesus is exorcizing demons and liberating people from the bondage of Satan, it could only be because he was more powerful than the demonic realm itself, and has bound up Satan. Ched Myers reads the entire Gospel of Mark through this verse – Jesus is binding the strong man and setting free those who were oppressed. In the story of the Gerasene demoniac, Mark writes that “no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain,” for “no one had the strength to subdue him” (Mark 5:3-4). Jesus can do better than “binding” the man with chains, and heals him completely. And the strong man, here, is the Roman Empire.

After a brief conversation, Jesus then sends him into the nearby pigs. The pigs number two-thousand, and while an exact number of a Roman Legion is difficult to establish, it consisted roughly of several thousand soldiers. This small legion, now occupying the pigs, charged down into the sea and drowned. The term herd is “inappropriate for pigs, who do not travel in herds – often was used to refer to a band of military recruits.”<sup>25</sup> This is another clear flag signaling to the reader that the Legion is an allusion to Roman soldiers. The enemies of Israel being drowned in the sea hearkens back to the story of liberation from Egypt in Exodus. As God leads his people to the Promised Land, he parts the Red Sea to let the Israelites through, but when the Egyptian army gives chase, the waters close in upon them, and they all drown (Exodus 14-15). This ends the Egyptian attempt to recapture their former slaves; the Israelites are now free. The stampeding

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<sup>25</sup> Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 191.

pigs drowning in the sea clearly function “as a metaphor for the Jews’ fervent wish to see the Romans driven out of Palestine.”<sup>26</sup>

This story is incredibly incendiary, and a clear threat to the Roman Empire, who did not take kindly to anyone threatening to drive them out of the land. However, Mark’s proposed method for changing the status quo is very different from other possible solutions, and even from what is seen in Exodus. The demons drown in the form of pigs, but the man himself is healed. In fact, he emerges better, healthier, and happier than ever before. And the pigs are not forcibly drowned by Jesus, but apparently by the demons themselves. While drowning was “a fate many Jews wished on the Romans,”<sup>27</sup> nothing in the text indicates that God drove the herd of pigs into the water to drown. What are we to make of this?

Remember it is Odysseus that tried to solve the problem with violence, not Jesus. In Mark’s own day, the Zealots and others instigated a war with the Roman Empire, a war that had likely just concluded by the time Mark was writing, and it ended, like it did for Odysseus, in a disaster. It was absolutely a disaster in Gerasa, as Josephus explains:

Vespasian ... sent Lucius Annius to Gerasa with a cavalry and a considerable number of foot soldiers. After taking the town by assault, he killed a thousand of the young men who had not escaped, took their families captive, and allowed his soldiers to plunder the property. Finally, he set fire to the houses and marched against the surrounding villages. Those who were able-bodied fled, the weak perished, and all that was left went up in flames. So did the war spread throughout the mountain and plain country.<sup>28</sup>

The Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, and countless Jewish people were killed or starved to death. Vespasian, while soon to be honored as emperor, clearly committed war crimes in the process of victory.

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<sup>26</sup> Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 191.

<sup>27</sup> Verhoeven, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 230.

<sup>28</sup> Plutarch, *War*, IV, ix, 1. Quoted in Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 191.

Jesus, despite his opposition to the Roman occupation, was not a Zealot, “for their goal and their methods were not his. Jesus preached insurrection neither against Herod, who persecuted him, nor against the emperor. He was as far removed from a revolt against the state as from an unconditional inner acceptance of it.”<sup>29</sup> Walter Wink writes convincingly, “Jesus clearly rejected the military option as a way to redress Jewish grievances. He refused to lead troops in war against Rome, or defend his own cause by violent means. He endured the cross rather than prove false to his own nonviolent way. Through the history of his people’s violent and nonviolent struggle for survival, Jesus discovered a way of opposing evil without becoming evil in the process.”<sup>30</sup>

Mark insists that the way of Jesus will drive out the Roman Empire, but not through violence, but through healing and compassion. The Roman military does not need to be defeated; it needs to be converted, healed, and made to experience a change of heart. When that happens, they will leave and God will have freed the land from oppression yet again. The Romans are not enemies that need to be defeated but more like a sick and possessed man that needs to be healed and made whole.

This is now a doubly subversive story. It clearly condemns the Roman occupation, comparing them with the demonic, and promises their end. But it also does not align with the Zealots and others who use violence to achieve their goals. That can lead to temporary success (the “liberation” of Jerusalem for a few years, or the escape from Polyphemus’s cave), but cannot win the war (the Temple was then destroyed and the war lost, and Odysseus delayed his homecoming for years by gloating to Polyphemus). It undercuts those who support the

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<sup>29</sup> Oscar Cullmann, *Jesus and the Revolutionaries*, trans. Gareth Putnam (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 44.

<sup>30</sup> Wink, *The Powers That Be*, 69.

occupation, and undercuts those who believe ending the occupation should be pursued by violent means.

### **Compassion, Not Purity**

Even after all of the above, the story is still packed with more meaning. It has much to say about fidelity to purity obligations. The story could easily be read as an intentional litany of elements that would render a person unclean according to the purity code of the Hebrew Bible. Cemeteries and tombs were all unclean, as they exposed one to the dead. The incredibly large herd of swine is a clear purity-code danger, and the spirit of the demon itself is referred to as an “unclean spirit.” Furthermore, the Decapolis was a primarily Gentile area. Jesus has no sooner crossed over from Jewish to Gentile territory, then he is immediately confronted with tombs, unclean spirits, and thousands of pigs.

The purity code often sounds archaic to modern ears. “Within the modern church,” writes Marcus Borg,

we tend to view such disputes as trivial, seeing purity laws as part of the ritual or ceremonial law of ancient Judaism, and of little importance compared with the moral law. We wonder how any reasonably thoughtful person could be concerned about such matters, which strike us as rather silly. Moreover, we tend to think of purity in individualistic terms, as if it were something that an overly pious individual might become meticulous about.<sup>31</sup>

By contrast, in the time of Jesus, “purity was political.”<sup>32</sup>

Notions of purity were rooted in the Hebrew Bible; because “God is holy, therefore Israel is to be holy. Moreover, holiness was understood to mean ‘separation from everything unclean.’ Holiness thus meant the same as purity, and the passage was thus understood as, ‘You [Israel]

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<sup>31</sup> Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 1994), 49-50.

<sup>32</sup> Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, 50.

shall be pure as God is pure.’ The ethos of purity produced a politics of purity – that is, a society structured around a purity system.”<sup>33</sup> Almost everything, including people, could be classified as pure or impure, or somewhere in-between. In this way, purity served to stratify the people along a stratum of acceptability.

Sometimes a person’s purity would depend on their behavior or occupation, with “occupational groups such as tax collectors” regarded as “outcasts.”<sup>34</sup> Sometimes it depended on a person’s birth, with children born to unmarried parents or eunuchs considered perpetually impure.<sup>35</sup> Those who were outside of what was regarded as the physical norm, “the maimed, the chronically ill, lepers, eunuchs,”<sup>36</sup> or women in their menstrual cycle, were impure. The poor would find it very difficult to follow all of the purity rules and regulations, simply due to a lack of time, money, and occupational options, and so would be far more likely to be impure than the rich. Purity also functioned to incentivize tithing to the Temple, as all “untithed produce was ... impure and would not be purchased by the observant.”<sup>37</sup> Additionally, “all Gentiles were impure and unclean.”<sup>38</sup> Certain places central to the life of the broader community, such as the inside of the Temple in Jerusalem, were inaccessible unless one had maintained ritual purity.

In this way, the purity system separated those who were “inside,” clean, pure, and chosen from those who were “outside,” unclean, and impure. It demonstrated how seriously one took the Law of Moses and how devoted to God one was in their everyday life. It also relegated some, by virtue of their birth, gender, or physical well-being, to a lower status in the community than those

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<sup>33</sup> Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, 50.

<sup>34</sup> Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, 51.

<sup>35</sup> Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, 51.

<sup>36</sup> Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, 51.

<sup>37</sup> Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, 52.

<sup>38</sup> Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, 52.



who were observant. Because the purity code could be difficult to follow, and impurity could so easily be transmitted from one person to the next, the code served to stratify Jewish society into separate classes.

When Jesus crosses the sea to spend time with a Gentile man with an unclean spirit among the tombs and two-thousand pigs, he is clearly violating the central purity tenets that regulated Jewish social life, and he says not a word about it. It is as though he does not care about any of these distinctions. Jesus only leaves the area because the people present ask him to leave. He, apparently, would have gladly stayed longer. It is evident that Jesus has no concern for purity obligations. This is consistent with what we find Jesus doing all throughout the Gospel of Mark. The Kingdom of God functions to overturn traditional ethical and cultural norms in favor of a more radical practice of compassion and mercy, practices that override the importance of concerns like maintaining ritual purity.

Jesus subverts the orientation of the Mosaic Law, not to overturn it completely, but to reorient its priorities. “Compassion, not holiness,” Jesus teaches “is the dominant quality of God, and is therefore to be the ethos of the community that mirrors God.”<sup>39</sup> Loving others, and practicing compassion, must always take priority. This ethic then becomes incarnate in the life of the early Church, which became known for visiting prisoners in jail, helping the poor, and going into plague-infested areas to heal the sick. Jesus started “an inclusive movement, negating the boundaries of the purity system. It included women, untouchables, the poor, the maimed, and the marginalized, as well as some people of stature who found his vision attractive.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, 54.

<sup>40</sup> Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, 56.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout the Gospel of Mark, including Jesus's crucifixion, Jesus is depicted as a nonviolent warrior. His life is characterized by service to others, fighting for their health and well-being. Unlike the heroes of the *Iliad*, Jesus does not wage his war against fellow human beings, but against the demonic forces that hold them in bondage. He comes to set them free from their oppression, which includes an enslavement to the ways of violence that would have been familiar to anyone with an even passing familiarity with the stories of Homer. As Dennis MacDonald has written, "whereas Odysseus told blind and naked Polyphemus to let others know that it was he who had blinded him, Jesus told the erstwhile demoniac, now clothed and rational, to let others know that God had healed him. The contrast could hardly be more transvaluative."<sup>41</sup> By living a life of nonviolent service to others, one did not just imitate the works of the great heroes, but could even transcend them. Odysseus, for all his cunning, remains bound to the myth of redemptive violence. Jesus, however, shows an alternate path, one no less heroic, but one characterized by the practice of service, not war, of compassion, not violence. It is an unfamiliar journey for a hero to take, but one Jesus follows all the way to his death on the cross. When "one of those who stood near drew his sword and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear" (Mark 14:47) in response to Jesus's arrest, Jesus merely talks with his captors, asking them, "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a rebel" (14:48)? He is not someone who chooses violence, like the rebels of his day or the heroes of Homer. But that does not lessen his commitment to overturning oppression, even Roman oppression. But the path he advocates is a nonviolent one, nonviolent acts of courage and heroism.

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<sup>41</sup> MacDonald, *The Gospels and Homer*, 218.

## **Chapter Six: The Problem of Justice and Knowledge**

In the previous chapters, we have explored how the Gospel of Mark adjusts the motivation for courageous behavior as well as the shape of that behavior, becoming nonviolent. What remains left to explore is how one learns to be courageous and what the right course of action is. These topics are treated together because the topic of courage is closely bound together with the question of knowledge. This was the “conclusion” of a fascinating attempt to define “courage” in Plato’s *Laches*. Like many of the early Socratic dialogues, the attempt fails, but sometimes failure can be productive in its own way, and that seems to be the case here. Before diving into the heart of the question, we will visit this discussion in Plato.

Laches defines courage as “a sort of endurance of the soul,” but it cannot be any such endurance.<sup>1</sup> Socrates quickly gets Laches to clarify that it is only “wise endurance” that can potentially count as courage.<sup>2</sup> But that leads to further problems, as sometimes the courageous course of action is not terribly wise from the standpoint of longevity or safety. Socrates presents a hypothetical situation here:

Suppose a man endures in battle, and his willingness to fight is based on wise calculation because he knows that others are coming to his aid and that he will be fighting men who are fewer than those on his side, and inferior to them, and in addition his position is stronger: would you say that this man, with his kind of wisdom and preparation, endures more courageously or a man in the opposite camp who is willing to remain and hold out?<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Laches* 192b-c, trans. Rosamond Kent Sprague, in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Plato, *Laches* 192d.

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Laches* 193a.

The answer, of course, is that more courage is demonstrated by the one facing impossible odds than the one who is “wise” in pressing on, believing that he has a good chance at victory. The latter is being smart and strategic, while the other is venturing courage even when the more realistic and seemingly prudent course of action would be to flee. This dilemma is illustrated by Odysseus in the *Iliad*:

Now Odysseus the spear-famed was left alone, nor did any  
of the Argives stay beside him, since fear had taken all of them.  
And troubled, he spoke then to his own great-hearted spirit:  
‘Ah me, what will become of me? It will be a great evil  
if I run, fearing their multitude, yet deadlier if I am caught  
alone; and Kronos’ son drove to flight the rest of the Danaäns.  
Yet still, why does the heart within me debate on these things?  
Since I know that it is the cowards who walk out of the fighting,  
but if one is to win honor in battle, he must by all means  
stand his ground strongly, whether he be struck or strike down another.’<sup>4</sup>

He knows he is outnumbered, and that the prudent course of action would be to take flight like the rest of the Greek army. But he also knows that courage requires him to stand firm, regardless of the danger. Andrei Zavalii highlights another example in his work on courage, the lament of Hector for having gotten other Trojans killed through overconfidence as he is about to face Achilles:

“Ah me! If I go now inside the wall and the gateway,  
Poulydamas will be first to put a reproach upon me,  
since he tried to make me lead the Trojans inside the city  
on that accursed night when brilliant Achilleus rose up,  
and I would not obey him, but that would have been far better.  
Now, since by my own recklessness I have ruined my people,  
I feel shame before the Trojans and the Trojan women with trailing  
robes, that someone who is less of a man than I will say of me:  
‘Hektor believed in his own strength and ruined his people.’  
Thus they will speak: and as for me, it would be much better  
at that time, to go against Achilleus, and slay him, and come back,  
or else be killed by him in glory in front of the city.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Hom., *Il.* 11.401-410.

<sup>5</sup> Hom., *Il.* 22.99-110.

Hector here recalls a time when he faced danger willingly and got people killed as a result, a tragic consequence of his own overconfidence in his strength.

So when does facing risks become courageous, and when is it either a pursuit of fanaticism or rashness? Courage seemingly must be both wise and foolish, wise in avoiding recklessness but foolish in facing long odds, throwing caution to the wind, and pressing on anyway. This paradox makes the prospects for a tidy definition of courage remote.

However, Socrates's other conversation partner, Nicias, ventures that courage is a kind of knowledge, specifically "the knowledge of the fearful and the hopeful in war and in every other situation."<sup>6</sup> Those who lack this knowledge but demonstrate what appears to be courage are not, in fact, courageous, but simply

rash and mad. Or do you really suppose I call all children courageous, who fear nothing because they have no sense? On the contrary, I think that rashness and courage are not the same thing. My view is that very few have a share of courage and foresight, but that a great many, men and women and children and wild animals, partake in boldness and audacity and rashness and lack of foresight. These cases, which you and the man in the street call courageous, I call rash, whereas the courageous ones are the sensible people I was talking about.<sup>7</sup>

The masses, according to Nicias, lack courage but can demonstrate boldness. But those who have the wisdom of courage know precisely when it is appropriate to risk it all and when it is not.

But knowledge of this sort would mean a person has penetrated to the depth of being itself. They understand the structure of reality so well that they are able, in any situation, to pursue the right course of action. It is questionable according to Socrates whether one is really dealing anymore with courage as one part of virtue, rather than virtue itself. Courage would have

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<sup>6</sup> Plato, *Laches* 194e-195a.

<sup>7</sup> Plato, *Laches* 197a-c.

to “be the knowledge of practically all goods and evils put together.”<sup>8</sup> Knowing how to act in every situation would encompass not just courage but justice, temperance, and all the rest of the virtues.

So the discussion in the *Laches* can lead to a few possible conclusions. One is the “unity of the virtues,” the idea that one cannot possess knowledge of a mere part of virtue, say, temperance and justice, but not courage. One either is completely virtuous or is thrown back upon their ignorance of what is to be avoided and what is to be risked. Another conclusion is drawn by Paul Tillich, who suggests that any examination of courage necessarily involves ontological considerations. Tillich writes “that an understanding of courage presupposes an understanding of man and of his world, its structures and values. Only he who knows this knows what to affirm and what to negate. The ethical question of the nature of courage leads inescapably to the ontological question of the nature of being.”<sup>9</sup> Therefore courage is a particularly useful virtue to examine, as it inexorably drives one to questions about the nature of reality. He also writes that this process can be reversed; therefore “courage can show us what being is, and being can show us what courage is.”<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, it is necessary to look not at courage in isolation, but how courage works together with knowledge. Courage without wisdom or knowledge is just recklessness, or could even mean the pursuit of evil causes, hardly a virtue. How does one develop the wisdom and knowledge necessary in order to properly make courageous acts a virtue and not a vice?

That brings the discussion of courage to the topic of epistemology, broadly understood as how we know the things we know. In Western culture, there has been a variety of attempts to

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<sup>8</sup> Plato, *Laches* 199d.

<sup>9</sup> Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, 4.

bring clarity to the question of epistemology. According to Kevin Aho, “one can make the broad claim that the conflicting traditions of Hebraic faith on the one hand and Greek reason on the other have informed our sense of who we are.”<sup>11</sup>

The *Iliad* makes little contribution here unfortunately, given the lack of any real belief in the justice of the gods. One relies upon divine revelation to determine the best course of action, but the gods are fickle and frequently change their minds or even lie. It was noted in chapter three how deeply unreliable the gods are, not just in terms of loyalty but even when it comes to simply telling the truth. One needs to treat the gods with all reverence, while Zeus has no problem sending lying dreams to Agamemnon that will cause many to die that day. Emily Wilson notes that “beyond his personal anger at Agamemnon’s rude behavior, Achilles’ wrath is motivated by the sense of cosmic unfairness.”<sup>12</sup> The world is spun by fate, and there is precious little one can do to alter that fate. That which is fated to happen happens, and fairness does not enter into the equation. John Heath notes that “the Homeric gods - most obviously those in the *Iliad* - have no interest in justice as we would define it.”<sup>13</sup> Instead, the gods “are all amoral and often immoral deities who react egomaniacally to perceived wrongs, punishing anyone who damages *their* honor or challenges *them*.”<sup>14</sup> In the succeeding centuries, many, perhaps none as effectively as Plato, have challenged this depiction of the gods, with “many Greek intellectuals view[ing] Homer’s gods as amoral or immoral and unjust.”<sup>15</sup> So to look at the question of justice and knowledge, Plato is a more helpful dialogue partner. He will be returned to shortly. The

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<sup>11</sup> Kevin Aho, *Existentialism*, 2nd ed. (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2020), 1.

<sup>12</sup> Emily Wilson, *Iliad*, xxxv.

<sup>13</sup> John Heath, *The Bible, Homer, and the Search for Meaning in Ancient Myths: Why We Would Be Better Off with Homer’s Gods* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 262.

<sup>14</sup> John Heath, *The Bible, Homer, and the Search for Meaning in Ancient Myths*, 263.

<sup>15</sup> John Heath, *The Bible, Homer, and the Search for Meaning in Ancient Myths*, 276.

Western heritage is divided on how we come to know courage, and understanding the division will help make sense of how the Gospel of Mark views epistemology.

### **Δίκη in Greek Literature**

Where the *Iliad*, and Greek mythology more generally, does make a helpful contribution is in its notion of δίκη, figuring out the right course of action. Δίκη is ordinarily connected with notions of law and custom in Greek literature. The world in a state of δίκη is in proper balance, with the customs, traditions, and laws, both divine and human, all being followed, with the gods receiving the respect they believe is rightfully theirs, and human beings obeying their limits and living virtuous lives. In *Odyssey* III.52, for example, Athena, disguised as Mentor, rejoices at Peisistratus' "decorum" in giving her the golden cup first due to her older age when offering libations to Poseidon. The word translated "decorum" here is δικάϊω. One acts in a just, proper way when one observes the necessary customs having been passed down through the ages. Peisistratus did so, and thereby impressed the god. It is "right" (δίκη), writes Aeschylus in *Seven Against Thebes*, to sing a song of mourning for the dead as Hades has his victory.<sup>16</sup> The word is often simply understood as "way," as in what is customary among the gods or among mortals. It is "the way" (ἡ δίκη) of the dead to not be able to be grasped or held,<sup>17</sup> just as the greed and insolence of Penelope's suitors was never "the way" (ἡ δίκη) a woman was wooed in the past.<sup>18</sup> A trial can be referred to as ἡ δίκη,<sup>19</sup> as well as an indictment,<sup>20</sup> and an ἀντίδικος is an opponent in court, again linking δίκη directly with the law.

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<sup>16</sup> Aeschylus, *Seven Against Thebes*, 865-870.

<sup>17</sup> Hom., *Od.* 11.218.

<sup>18</sup> Hom., *Od.* 18.275.

<sup>19</sup> Xenophon, *Apologia Socratis*, 24.1.

<sup>20</sup> Plato, *Euthyphro* 2a, translated by G. M. A. Grube, in Cooper, *Complete Works*.



How justice works in practice in the story of a hero can be demonstrated by looking at an episode in the story of Heracles. Heracles, after the completion of his twelve labors, sought to take a wife after giving away his first wife, Megara, to his companion Iolaüs. He sought to marry Iolê, daughter of Eurytus, but was initially refused. In anger, Heracles drove away Eurytus' horses. Eurytus' son Iphitus becomes suspicious, believing they were stolen by Heracles, and, after proving unable to locate the horses in Heracles' fields, Heracles then throws him off a tower to his death. As a result of this murder, Heracles falls ill and asks Apollo what he must do to rid himself of this illness. He is informed he must sell himself into slavery, with his purchase price going to the children of Iphitus to compensate them for the loss of their father. Once he does so, the sickness leaves him.<sup>21</sup>

This story, while simple, shows how δίκη interacts with the life of heroes through a five-step process: δίκη - ὕβρις - ἄτη - νέμεσις - δίκη. Heracles started this story in a state of δίκη. He was of noble character and honored by the gods. He completed his twelve labors successfully and will experience apotheosis. However, he is struck by ὕβρις. He acts entitled to the hand of Iolê, and does not show due deference to her father. "Ὑβρις "is claiming more for oneself, exalting oneself higher, than is just."<sup>22</sup> This ὕβρις brings about ἄτη, a deluded state of mind that causes him to act out rashly, in this case by driving away his horses and, much more seriously, by murdering Iphitus. The result of ἄτη is νέμεσις, a divine judgment upon a transgression of δίκη, in this case, an illness that befalls Heracles and that will not depart from him until he atones for his actions. Having deprived Iphitus' children of their father unjustly, Heracles must forfeit the rest of his life to slavery, with the proceeds from his sale all going to support the children of

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<sup>21</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, Book IV.31.1-5.

<sup>22</sup> Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*, 36.

Iphitus. Once this is done, the balance of justice has been restored, and the situation returns to a state of δίκη. Heroes, even in their transgressions, can still serve as negative models of conduct, illustrating what not to do. These five steps, δίκη - ὕβρις - ἄτη - νέμεσις - δίκη, “governed the moral and spiritual lives of antiquity and was the framework within which the stories of the heroes were told.”<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps the most famous Greek myth that depicts a threefold cycle of δίκη - ὕβρις - ἄτη - νέμεσις - δίκη is Homer’s *Iliad*. The story starts *in media res* with Agamemnon having offended Apollo by insulting his priest Chryses and refusing to return Chryses’ daughter to him, despite the offer of a ransom. Agamemnon’s ὕβρις, placing himself above Apollo’s priest, brought about ἄτη, his act of threatening the priest. Apollo follows through with νέμεσις, plaguing the Greek armies with a deadly pestilence. On the verge of losing the war, and learning that his ὕβρις is the cause, Agamemnon relents and returns the girl to Chryses, having to do so now for no ransom at all, and the plague ceases.

However, his ὕβρις again gets the best of him when, in a war of words with Achilles, Agamemnon demands Achilles turn over Briseïs, Achilles’ “prize,” to him to compensate for the loss of Chryses’ daughter. Having scarcely returned to a state of δίκη, he already begins the cycle anew. Agamemnon’s desire not to lose face in front of the Greek forces was his ὕβρις, and it brought about ἄτη again. Νέμεσις occurs when Achilles immediately decides to withdraw from the Trojan War and refuses to fight, he and all of his men. Achilles is the best fighter on the Greek side, and his absence from the battlefield almost causes them to lose the war to the Trojan forces yet again. Eventually, Agamemnon relents, and offers the return of both Briseïs and a

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<sup>23</sup> Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*, 37.

substantial load of gifts. By doing so, Agamemnon has humbled himself and returned the epic to a state of δίκη.

However, the cycle is doomed to occur yet again, when Achilles spurns this offering. His hatred of Agamemnon has gotten the best of him, and he can be viewed as acting rashly in spurning Agamemnon's offer of recompense. Νέμεσις befalls Achilles when he loses his best friend and closest companion, Patroclus, to Hector. Patroclus drew Hector's attention by wearing the armor of Achilles, making Achilles indirectly responsible for his death. Achilles then returns to the battlefield with no reward of any kind this time, mirroring what happened with Chryses. With Achilles's return to the battlefield, Hector is soon defeated and the victory of the Greek armies is assured, as is Achilles's heroic destiny.

The whole plot of the *Iliad* therefore can be viewed around this cycle of δίκη - ὕβρις - ἄτη - νέμεσις - δίκη. When someone fails the test and departs from δίκη, the whole group, along with the hero himself, suffers needlessly. In this way, Greek mythology promotes δίκη through both positive and negative examples. Positive examples show what to do, and negative examples show the implications and deleterious consequences of not honoring δίκη by correctly following the best examples of virtue, along with the law and its customs.

### **Plato, Δίκη, and the Epic Tradition**

As illustrated above, heroes frequently make mistakes and violate the code of justice. The story cycle of δίκη - ὕβρις - ἄτη - νέμεσις - δίκη assumes that the hero will at some point leave a state of δίκη and have to return to it after facing the necessary consequences. When learning ethics from the heroes, one must take care to emulate just the good and learn from the bad. Because they are far from flawless, one cannot emulate the stories without taking the time to

reflect properly on their strengths and weaknesses. Plato, however, had a more dramatic solution to the problem of heroes acting unjustly in his ideal city, depicted in the *Republic*, one that he believed was necessary in order for the soul to function as it ought. He sought to get rid of most epic poetry altogether. It is, according to Plato, what reason persuades us to do (ὁ γὰρ λόγος ἡμᾶς ἥρει) and what the soul requires.<sup>24</sup> Throughout the *Republic*, “Plato rails at poets and poetry ... The list of charges is long.”<sup>25</sup> He concludes his discussion of poetry in the *Republic* by stating he will “admit no poetry into our city save only hymns to the gods and the praises of good men.”<sup>26</sup>

In the *Republic*, Socrates is depicted as speaking freely, convinced his conversation partner will not betray him “to the tragic poets and all other imitators” (πρὸς τοὺς τῆς τραγωδίας ποιητὰς καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους ἅπαντας τοὺς μιμητικούς).<sup>27</sup> He is convinced the kind of poetry performed by devotees of Homer brings “ruin” (λῶβη) to the mind.<sup>28</sup> He defiantly questions whether any city has actually benefited from the work of Homer, as he is not renowned as a great legislator or general or teacher of a certain way of life.<sup>29</sup> If he were a really great and skilled man, he would have done more with himself than writing poetry. He has not through his work tangibly improved the life of citizens anywhere. If Homer has possessed “not imitation but real knowledge” (οὐ μιμεῖσθαι ἀλλὰ γινώσκειν δυνάμενος), he would have acquired students in his own day, but he did not.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Plato, *Republic* 607a, trans. G. M. A. Grube, rev. C. D. C. Reeve, in Cooper, *Complete Works*.

<sup>25</sup> Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 38.

<sup>26</sup> Plato, *Republic* 607b.

<sup>27</sup> Plato, *Republic* 595b.

<sup>28</sup> Plato, *Republic* 595b.

<sup>29</sup> Plato, *Republic* 599e-600b.

<sup>30</sup> Plato, *Republic* 600c-e.

This is because he, along with all other poets, are mere imitators of the truth, but do not possess truth as it really is, in its true form. Homer is merely an “imitator of images of excellence” (μιμητὰς εἰδώλων ἀρετῆς), but does “not grasp the truth” (ἀληθείας οὐχ ἄπτεσθαι).<sup>31</sup> Poets in general know nothing but how to imitate (μιμεῖσθαι).<sup>32</sup> This is disguised by the form in which the poet works. The rhythm, the meter, the harmony all serve to cloak the basic ignorance hidden underneath, but when stripped of these adornments, the truth of their ignorance is laid bare.<sup>33</sup> The truth is that the poet, as a mere imitator, knows nothing worth mentioning about the things he imitates (τόν τε μιμητικὸν μηδὲν εἰδέναι ἄξιον λόγου περὶ ὧν μιμεῖται).<sup>34</sup> For useful information one must go to the user, or even the maker, of such a thing.<sup>35</sup> Mimesis is a cheap, paltry, inferior thing that associates with other inferior things and gives birth to inferior children (φαύλη ἄρα φαύλω συγγιγνομένη φαῦλα γεννᾷ ἢ μιμητική).<sup>36</sup>

It in fact produces injustice as it appeals to a less noble part of the soul than does reason, and in this way causes the soul to be at war with itself.<sup>37</sup> It increases and waters those things that it ought to dry up instead (τρέφει γὰρ ταῦτα ἄρδουσα, δέον αὐχμεῖν).<sup>38</sup> It is better to focus on the rational soul, not stir up the inferior parts of the soul with fanciful tales and lofty language that is not actually edifying. He targets specifically laments, noting that we laud the poet who can bring out a strong emotional response in us through lament, but when faced with such a situation ourselves, consider such actions to be those of a woman (ἐκεῖνο δὲ γυναικός) and therefore, for

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<sup>31</sup> Plato, *Republic* 600e.

<sup>32</sup> Plato, *Republic* 601a.

<sup>33</sup> Plato, *Republic* 601b.

<sup>34</sup> Plato, *Republic* 602b.

<sup>35</sup> Plato, *Republic* 601d-602a.

<sup>36</sup> Plato, *Republic* 603b.

<sup>37</sup> Plato, *Republic* 605a-c.

<sup>38</sup> Plato, *Republic* 606d.

Plato, undignified and unworthy.<sup>39</sup> If we give praise to such responses in poetry, however, it will be harder to guard ourselves against responding similarly. It is better, once again, to feed the part of the soul we wish to always be in control, the rational soul.<sup>40</sup> If we feed this part of our soul, we will be less likely to go astray and act in the terrible ways that can be seen throughout epic poetry. This is a “strikingly novel” argument according to Bruce Lincoln, “treat[ing] poetry as an art of mimesis that satisfies audiences with cheap imitations of what is real, making them lazy consumers of images rather than devoted seekers after truth.”<sup>41</sup>

For these reasons, the only poetry Plato is willing to allow in his perfect city is hymns to the gods and that which praises good people (μόνον ὕμνους θεοῖς καὶ ἐγκώμια τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς).<sup>42</sup> This is the only kind of poetry that is edifying to the rational soul. There should be no ascribing to the gods anything wicked, or any quarreling amongst the gods. In fact, the gods cannot even be the cause of all things, because the gods only do what is good, and are never harmful, deceitful, or vindictive.<sup>43</sup> All evil, then, has a different source. There will be no poetry allowed “that show[s] the gods doing anything evil, and those in which the wicked prosper and the just suffer are also out.”<sup>44</sup> If all speech, whether poetry or prose, is not constrained in this way, then the rational soul will not be lord over the workings of the city. Instead, pleasure and pain will rule in the city as opposed to the law (ἡδονή σοι καὶ λύπη ἐν τῇ πόλει βασιλεύσετον ἀντὶ νόμου).<sup>45</sup> Plato ends his attack on poetry with an acknowledgement that if a reasoned case could

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<sup>39</sup> Plato, *Republic* 605d-e.

<sup>40</sup> Plato, *Republic* 606a-b.

<sup>41</sup> Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth*, 38.

<sup>42</sup> Plato, *Republic* 607a.

<sup>43</sup> Plato, *Republic* 379a-380b.

<sup>44</sup> Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth*, 42.

<sup>45</sup> Plato, *Republic* 607a.

be made for its inclusion in the ideal city, the philosopher will gladly listen, but for now one should be on guard and protect their soul from its insidious influence.<sup>46</sup>

What is at stake here is really an epistemological struggle. The truth claims made in poetry are different from the claims made by philosophy, and they have different foundational sources. Bruce Lincoln argues that “the central issue” in contention between Plato and the epic poetic tradition and its mythology is one of “discursive authority.”<sup>47</sup> He writes:

What kind of speech will command the respect and attention of others? Poetry (and if so, epic, lyric, sympotic, or tragic) or prose (legal, aphoristic, rhetorical, etc.)? Spoken or written? Narrative or propositional argumentation (and if the latter, analytic, dialectic, eristic, or sophistic)? Traditional or novel? That which claims divine inspiration (oracles, seers, and mysteries, as well as poets) or that backed by the power of the state? More pointed is the personal form of this question, which is usually unacknowledged but always present. *Whose* speech will command respect and attention? The stakes in this struggle are high and amount to nothing less than discursive and ideological hegemony.<sup>48</sup>

Plato is making a broad based attack against the epic tradition and attempting to replace one way of knowing with another, removing poetry from its lofty place as the speech of the gods, sanctioned and directed by the Muses, and putting in its place reasoned philosophical discourse.

Of course, what is also at stake are issues of morality. The epic tradition has, at best, a checkered relationship with morality and justice in Plato’s view. It is because Plato believes in justice that he cannot simply accept the claims made about the gods and even some heroes. One cannot imagine Plato ever countenancing the honoring of Cleomedes, mass murderer of children that he was, as a hero simply because his body could not be found. Nor could he sanction any story that has the gods acting wickedly, for this is something the gods can never and should never do.

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<sup>46</sup> Plato, *Republic* 607d-608b.

<sup>47</sup> Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth*, 43.

<sup>48</sup> Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth*, 43.

Significant for this writing is that Plato does not foreclose on the possibility of poetry or mythology totally. He would allow poetry that is more edifying than Homer, such as that which praises the gods in a worthy fashion as well as the deeds of truly good persons. And he utilizes mythology for teaching certain truths even in the *Republic*. To be sure, he uses myth rarely, and in general “is condescending toward philosophers who stoop to traffic in *mythoi* ... Still, he himself is not above quoting a myth when it helps to advance his case.”<sup>49</sup> He acknowledges the attachment that he and other citizens have with Homer and leaves the door open for stories, whether poetry or prose, that have a better story to tell about the gods and about heroes. Like, perhaps, the Gospel of Mark.

### **Jesus and Δίκη in the Gospel of Mark**

Jesus is never described as “just” or “righteous” using the root δίκ- in the Gospel of Mark. John the Baptist is (Mark 6:20), but not Jesus. The only time Jesus utters the word it is to say he has not come to call the just (δικαίους), but rather to call sinners (Mark 2:17). The Pharisees in this Gospel are firmly committed “to rigid social boundaries between the ‘righteous’ and the ‘sinner.’ This boundary Jesus flatly rejects, and his mission is specifically aimed at transgressing it.”<sup>50</sup> Those are the only two occasions in this Gospel where the word appears. It would be wrong to make too much of this omission. But it is worth noting, and could be a clue that Mark may be doing something different here than in other hero stories.

Further supporting this is the antagonistic relationship Jesus has with the Law and traditional customs.<sup>51</sup> Once while in the synagogue he encounters a man with a withered hand.

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<sup>49</sup> Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth*, 39.

<sup>50</sup> Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 158-159.

<sup>51</sup> I should note here that I am sidestepping the debate about whether or not the historical Jesus was consistently Torah-observant during his lifetime. To put my cards on the table, I find the notion that Jesus himself



He brings the man up into the middle of the crowd and “says to them, “Is it lawful (ἔξεστιν) on the Sabbath to do good, or to do evil? To save life (ψυχὴν) or to kill” (Mark 3:3-4a)? The crowd is unable to answer him. Jesus looks upon them angrily, grieved “at the hardness of their hearts” (Mark 3:5a). Jesus here is unconcerned about what has been deemed lawful; he is concerned about the state of the crowd's hearts. The reference to the “hardness of their hearts” may have called to mind Pharaoh’s hardened heart in Exodus (for example, Ex. 9:12, 10:1, 10:20, 10:27, 11:10, 14:8), thereby depicting those who seek to follow Sabbath regulations strictly with the enemies of God! What Jesus wants to see in their hearts is compassion, as “Jesus here implies that human need and well-being override the prohibition of work on the Sabbath.”<sup>52</sup> He goes ahead and heals the person anyway, and in so doing conducts “carefully staged political theater. Jesus could presumably heal the man with the withered hand in private without provoking a reaction (as in 1:29), but chooses yet again to force the issue.”<sup>53</sup> Forcing the issue was dangerous; as Dennis MacDonald notes, “by curing the man on the Sabbath, Jesus had put his life in danger. According to Exod 31:14 and Num 15:32-36, working on the Sabbath was punishable with death, even though in Jesus’s day this penalty seldom was applied.”<sup>54</sup> The same dynamic is visible when Jesus says, “These people with their lips honor me, but their hearts are separated far away from me” (Mark 7:6). Jesus is concerned with their hearts, not their words or whether they follow traditional mores and laws as δίκη would require.

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was Torah-observant and that the antagonistic relationship with the Law came about with Paul (or even later, with Paul’s interpreters) unconvincing. But regardless of one’s position on what the historical Jesus was like, I am looking just at the way he is being portrayed in the Gospel of Mark.

<sup>52</sup> Collins, *Mark: A Commentary*, 209.

<sup>53</sup> Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 162.

<sup>54</sup> Dennis R. MacDonald, *From the Earliest Gospel (Q+) to the Gospel of Mark* (Lanham, CO: Lexington Books, 2020), 141.

A similar dynamic can be seen in Mark 10:5. When asked about divorce, Jesus acknowledges that Moses allowed a husband to dismiss a wife with a bill of divorce, but says this was due only to their hard hearts (τὴν σκληροκαρδίαν ὑμῶν). Here again Jesus is shown as being more concerned with the state of one's heart than what the Torah itself has to say. Jesus “*refuses* to enlist in the legal debate over the divorce statute itself.”<sup>55</sup> He simply disagrees and goes beyond what Moses said. Jesus’ “reply to his interlocutors’ response implies that the commandments regarding divorce come from Moses and not directly from God” (Gal. 3:19-20), which opens up all sorts of interpretative possibilities for radically re-reading the Torah.<sup>56</sup>

His attitude toward the Sabbath regulations in the Law is dismissive: “The Sabbath was made on account of people, and not people on account of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). This dismissive response “does not conform to the rules of rabbinic argumentation from scripture, but that should come as no surprise.”<sup>57</sup> Jesus is more concerned with people’s hunger than he is with the finer points of the Law, a point with dramatic implications. Ched Myers writes,

Mark consistently argues that solidarity with the poor [and hungry] also means addressing oppressive structures. This may well mean breaking the law, but such action is legitimated by the Human One [the Son of Man], who in overturning the authority of purity and debt codes is being revealed to the reader not only as ‘lord of the Sabbath’ but lord of the entire ‘house’ itself (13:35).<sup>58</sup>

Adela Yarbro Collins argues similarly when she says, “The point would seem to be that human beings are free to interpret the prohibition to work on the Sabbath in new ways to address human needs, that is, in ways that benefit and do not harm.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 265.

<sup>56</sup> Collins, *Mark: A Commentary*, 467.

<sup>57</sup> Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 160.

<sup>58</sup> Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 161.

<sup>59</sup> Collins, *Mark: A Commentary*, 204.

Jesus does distinguish at one point between the commandment of God (ἐντολὴν τοῦ θεοῦ) and traditions (παράδοσιν) (Mark 7), honoring the first and dismissing the second, but as we just saw, Jesus will question even the written Law of Moses. One should not make too much of the distinction drawn in Mark 7 and ignore the rest of the Gospel of Mark and its attitude toward the Law. Jesus is always depicted as obedient to God, but that does not make him obedient to the Law. The overwhelming impression one gets from the Gospel is that Jesus' teaching is new wine that requires a new wineskin (Mark 2:22).

In fact, the scribes (οἱ γραμματεῖς), here meaning learned individuals able to teach the Law, are consistently, without exception in this Gospel, portrayed as enemies of Jesus. Jesus's treatment of them reflects his conviction that "all sectors of the ruling class are ultimately aligned in their opposition to the kingdom."<sup>60</sup> They accuse him of "having Beelzebul," and argue, "he casts out the demons by the ruler of the demons" (Mark 3:22). He warns in his teaching, "Watch out for the scribes" (Mark 12:38)! He casts them as a bunch of vain, greedy people, and "intends to contest their claim to being 'just' (*dikaious*)."<sup>61</sup> The Law, when it comes up, is almost always being used by the scribes as a device to trap Jesus in some misconduct for which he can be punished or killed. This thread runs all the way through Jesus' ministry in Mark - the Law is consistently depicted as a device to ensnare Jesus.

Jesus also does not personally follow the δίκη - ὕβρις - ἄτη - νέμεσις - δίκη pattern. He never falls prey to ὕβρις. This would, interestingly, make Jesus the personification of true δίκη, despite the word never being used to describe him, perhaps because of its connotations with the Law. He does, however, suffer the iniquity of others, and is even described as being God-

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<sup>60</sup> Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 158.

<sup>61</sup> Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 159.

forsaken upon the cross. He remains faithful and courageous until the end, thereby, in the logic of the hero story, earning for himself the prize of immortality. It is “how one reacted in the situations of life set by the Fates and gods, how one faced the *hubris* of others or endured the penalties for one’s own, [that] showed one’s quality of soul.”<sup>62</sup> Jesus is depicted as passing all the tests given to him, and by not falling prey to ὕβρις, he serves as a better, more ideal model for emulation.

### **Jesus and Δίκη: A Different Kind of Hero**

What we have in the Jesus story is a conflation of the concerns of the mythological tradition found in epic poetry and those of Plato. Heroes, despite their name, were not always personifications of justice as we have seen earlier. They made mistakes, experienced failure, and occasionally were responsible for some quite evil actions. One had to learn to emulate their successes and avoid their failures. This is one of the reasons the poetic tradition and its mythology came under criticism by Plato, who thought the stories should focus on the good deeds of good persons, as well as the always good actions of the gods. Mark’s depiction of Jesus is, in contrast to other heroes, wholly positive. It tells the story of a hero in such a way that Plato perhaps would have approved. By not falling prey to ὕβρις and remaining noble throughout, the Gospel of Mark addresses the moral concerns that Plato had with Greek mythology. Jesus in the Gospel of Mark is, for its author and initial adherents, even more worthy of emulation than any other Greek hero. In this way, Mark brings Plato and the mythological tradition together in a unique and compelling way. While using the hero story as a template, he utilizes prose not poetry, thereby relying not on fanciful language to stir the emotions of the audience but instead

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<sup>62</sup> Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*, 37.

simply upon the power of the story and characters, and addresses Plato's concerns about the moral failings of gods and heroes.

Additionally, despite being more worthy of emulation, Jesus's primary concern was not for *δίκη* in the sense of following the Laws and customs handed down amongst his people. Jesus's concerns in this Gospel run far closer to those of Socrates and Plato, seeking justice in the soul. One is not just because they follow the law, but because their soul is in harmony. Again, this creates a compelling synthesis of the heroic tradition and Plato. Jesus lives the life of a Greco-Roman hero, but his concern is not that of most Greco-Roman heroes, unwilting fame, glory, and honor, but rather the care of souls.

Where the Gospel of Mark goes even further than Plato is in his antagonistic attitude towards the Law and its customs, an antagonism that Plato did not seem to share. Plato, despite not believing in the customs of Greek religion, would have allowed them to continue to maintain social order. Jesus is more combative than that, challenging the chief priests and scribes at every turn. What Jesus modeled in place of the Law was an emphasis on a pure heart and on love and compassion. That is why Jesus is grieved and angered at those who, while following the Law, refuse to heal a man on the Sabbath. What matters is not the following of the rules, but compassion flowing out of a heart that is not hardened but open. He feels free to jettison rules attached to the following of the Sabbath when they interfere with compassion, and he feels free to enact tougher standards, in the case of divorce for example, when that is what compassion requires.

Jesus, in other words, has a totally different way of being in the world, and a wholly different conception of what *δίκη* requires, one detached from the laws and customs one inherits.

## **Ways of Knowing**

So the Gospel of Mark deviates from most hero stories in its depiction of justice. But what about the Gospel of Mark's depiction of his ways of knowing the right course of action? Here the most helpful distinction is between the way of knowing given in Greek philosophy again and the one given in the Hebrew Bible. The division between Hebraic faith and Greek reason in older scholarship was described as "the difference between doing and knowing."<sup>63</sup> Hebraic faith was conceived as "extol[ling] the moral virtues as the substance and meaning of life," whereas Greek philosophy "subordinates [the moral virtues] to the intellectual virtues."<sup>64</sup> In this view, the Hebrew Bible was primarily concerned with spelling out the demands of God upon one's life, and one must heed those demands. Following the demand of God was what moral virtue was about, whereas for Greek philosophy, intellectual virtues took pride of place - knowing, understanding, and contemplating the Good. Right conduct followed from that knowledge. Matthew Arnold, who argued for this distinction, wrote that

to get rid of one's ignorance, to see things as they are, and by seeing them as they are to see them in their beauty, is the simple and attractive ideal which Hellenism holds out before human nature; and from the simplicity and charm of this idea, Hellenism, and human life in the hands of Hellenism, is invested with a kind of aerial ease, clearness, and radiancy.<sup>65</sup>

But whereas "the uppermost idea with Hellenism is to see things as they really are; the uppermost idea with Hebraism is conduct and obedience."<sup>66</sup> "Hebraism," Arnold writes,

has always been severely preoccupied with an awful sense ... of the difficulties which oppose themselves to man's pursuit or attainment of that perfection of which Socrates talks so hopefully, and, as from this point of view one might almost say, so glibly. It is all very well to talk of getting rid of one's ignorance, of seeing things in their reality, seeing them in their beauty; but how is this to be

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<sup>63</sup> William Barrett, *Irrational Man* (New York: Anchor Books, 1958), 70.

<sup>64</sup> Barrett, *Irrational Man*, 70.

<sup>65</sup> Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (New York: Start Publishing, 2017), 136,

<sup>66</sup> Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, 131.

done when there is something which thwarts and spoils all our efforts? This something is sin.<sup>67</sup>

Hebraic faith for Arnold was not as optimistic as Greek philosophy, and never quite felt comfortable within the world. There was no sense of this world being a *kosmos*, a well-regulated and ordered whole.

For Plato, knowledge comes through rational detachment, particularly from one's body. Plato expounds upon this in several places, notably in *Phaedo*, his depiction of Socrates's final conversation before dying at the end of the dialogue. He writes, "as long as we have a body and our soul is fused with such an evil we shall never adequately attain what we desire,"<sup>68</sup> a true understanding of the Good. This becomes difficult in the body, which "fills us with wants, desires, fears, all sorts of illusions and much nonsense, so that, as it is said, in truth and in fact no thought of any kind ever comes to us from the body. Only the body and its desires cause war, civil discord, and battles."<sup>69</sup> This causes Socrates to conclude that "if we are ever to have pure knowledge, we must escape from the body and observe things in themselves with the soul by itself."<sup>70</sup> This underlies his argument for seeing death as a positive development, for only then can the soul truly investigate matters without the hindrance of the body. In the meantime however, "while we live, we shall be closest to knowledge if we refrain as much as possible from association with the body and do not join with it more than we must, if we are not infected with its nature but purify ourselves from it until the god himself frees us. In this way we shall escape the contamination of the body's folly."<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, 136-137.

<sup>68</sup> Plato, *Phaedo* 66b, trans. G. M. A. Grube, in Cooper, *Complete Works*.

<sup>69</sup> Plato, *Phaedo* 66c.

<sup>70</sup> Plato, *Phaedo* 66d-e.

<sup>71</sup> Plato, *Phaedo* 67a.

This low estimation of the body undergirds the Greek philosophical understanding of truth coming through rational detachment. Portrayed originally in Orphism, this myth told the story of the generations of the world and how the Titans, “the older generation of earth deities from whom Zeus himself had wrested control, attacked the child” Dionysus, whom Zeus had fathered with Persephone, “and then dismembered, cooked, and ate him. Enraged, Zeus blasted the Titans into ash with his thunderbolts. From the ashes he made humans, who therefore partook of both natures: the divine Dionysus in their souls and the lawless rebellion of the Titans in their bodies.”<sup>72</sup> Hence was justified in story the idea of body/soul dualism, with the soul being divine and good and the body being rebellious and wicked. One cannot find truth while still attached to the things of the body. One must use the divine spark within the soul to discover it. Bultmann writes that Platonic philosophy sees the body “as a vessel, as the prison of the soul, as a burden from which the spirit strives to get free.”<sup>73</sup>

This gets further developed philosophically with the concept of the Logos. For the Stoics, to take one example, the universe comes to be seen as a living entity, with a world-soul called the Logos. This is the power of reason within it, and governs such things as the regular movements of the planets. People themselves are “Logos-being[s].”<sup>74</sup> They participate in the larger Logos, having access to the divine reason itself. The Stoics saw the universe as unfolding the desires of divine providence, and one finds their place in the world by seeing themselves as part of this universal whole, for “everything that happens happens in accordance with the law of nature, the law of God. And man has an inner affinity with God [through the soul].”<sup>75</sup> Bultmann goes on to

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<sup>72</sup> Riley, *The River of God*, 144.

<sup>73</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting*, trans. R. H. Fuller (New York: World Publishing, 1956), 142.

<sup>74</sup> Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting*, 136.

<sup>75</sup> Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting*, 139.



note that this soul “is the Logos of man, identical with the universal Logos, his intellect and will. It is the divine element in him, which lies within his own control.”<sup>76</sup> The wise person, therefore, will seek to cultivate the part of themselves that is divine, namely their reason, and not be distracted by the body and its desires.

It is only through the detachment of one’s rational faculties that one has a chance to comprehend what is real and true and enduring, whereas commitment to the body immerses one in a realm of finite, changeable, decaying things, not their true and enduring forms. The argument for this claim is bolstered by a contention that what is really real, “*ta ontos onta*, are the universals or Ideas.”<sup>77</sup> Everything that exists takes its form from the realm of Ideas, in which it participates, but only partly as, made of matter, it is subject to decay and change. The really real, the realm of Ideas, is where the Good is located, with reality at its deepest, truest, eternal, most real level. “The universal is fully real because it is eternal; the fleeting and changing particular has only a shadowy kind of reality because it passes and is then as if it had never been.”<sup>78</sup> The soul, made of the same substance as the divine, recalls this realm and yearns to return to it. Knowledge for Plato then is recollection. The soul does not actually learn anything new, but rather recalls what it once knew and has forgotten, being imprisoned in the tomb of the body. Some souls have the misfortune of having received “only a brief glance at the reality there,”<sup>79</sup> and struggle to recall it now. Others “had such bad luck when they fell down here that they were twisted by bad company into lives of injustice so that they forgot the sacred objects they had seen before. Only a few remain whose memory is good enough.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting*, 142.

<sup>77</sup> Barrett, *Irrational Man*, 85.

<sup>78</sup> Barrett, *Irrational Man*, 85.

<sup>79</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus* 250a, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, in Cooper, *Complete Works*.

<sup>80</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus* 250a.

Therefore “transcendence is not attained by the passionate faith of the whole person. It is achieved when reason, the ‘higher’ or divine part of the soul, rises above the ‘lower,’ animal part, above the fleeting perceptions and passions of the body.”<sup>81</sup> It is only right, says Plato, that “a philosopher’s mind grows wings, since its memory always keeps it as close as possible to those realities by being close to which the gods are divine.”<sup>82</sup> Speaking specifically on the role of education, Plato depicts the journey of the soul towards greater knowledge in his famous allegory of the cave. He pictures “human beings living in an underground, cavelike dwelling.”<sup>83</sup> They are bound to the rocks and cannot turn their heads or move. There are sources of light behind this person, and in front of the light move “all kinds of artifacts ... statues of people and other animals, made out of stone, wood, and every material.”<sup>84</sup> All the person can see, however, are their shadows. They cannot turn their heads to see the real objects, just their projections on the walls in front of them. Those shadows are what the person comes to view as reality, the sensory world in front of them. “The prisoners would in every way believe that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of those artifacts.”<sup>85</sup> If one were to be freed, however, they could turn around and see, for the first time, these things as they really are, not merely shadows, but the objects in their full reality. And venturing beyond the minor light sources in the cave, the prisoner, now freed, could ascend up the cave, past the objects themselves, and out into the freedom that exists outside the cave, when they behold the sun, or the Good, for the first time. This is the journey of the soul for Plato. It is how the philosopher's mind “grows wings.” It must turn away from transitory things and, using its divine reason, ascend to the image of the Good.

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<sup>81</sup> Aho, *Existentialism*, 2.

<sup>82</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus* 249c.

<sup>83</sup> Plato, *Republic* 514a.

<sup>84</sup> Plato, *Republic* 514c.

<sup>85</sup> Plato, *Republic* 515c.

To remain caught up in transitory, sensory things is to choose something far less than reality itself.

How does this work in practice? Plato argued that the soul was tripartite in character and could be compared to a chariot, with a driver, a left horse, and a right horse. The left horse is the appetitive part of the soul, the part that wants to follow the desires of the body. It is unruly and constantly wars against the commands of the charioteer. It is irrational and filled with lust for the things it sees. It is a “companion to wild boasts and indecency, he is shaggy around the ears - deaf as a post - and just barely yields to horsewhip and goad combined.”<sup>86</sup> The right horse is the *thymos*. It too is passionate and driven, but is “a lover of honor with modesty and self-control; companion to true glory, he needs no whip, and is guided by verbal commands alone.”<sup>87</sup> The charioteer is reason. As one can easily surmise by this point, the well-ordered soul will be driven by reason, the charioteer. The charioteer will rely on the whip and the power of the right horse to keep the left horse in line. If the left horse takes control, the person will live a life of debauchery and never reach the destination the charioteer has in mind, the Good. If the right horse takes control, things will be better, but it can still be led astray by the left horse. Only the soul with the charioteer firmly in command can complete the soul’s journey out of the cave.

To return to the Hebraic understanding, the contrast between works and thought noted above from earlier scholarship was subsequently deepened by thinkers like William Barrett and others, who suggested the distinction was a bit more complicated and nuanced than Arnold understood. Kevin Aho describes this more nuanced depiction as different kinds of knowing. Both traditions posit that we “have ‘higher’ potentialities, which allow us to surpass or transcend

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<sup>86</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus* 249e.

<sup>87</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus* 253d.

our finite earthly existence.”<sup>88</sup> For Greek philosophy, “transcendence was achieved from a position of rational detachment ... In the Hebraic tradition, the experience of transcendence is understood not in terms of detached reason but in terms of an intense faith and trust in an incomprehensible God.”<sup>89</sup> In a discussion centered around the Book of Job, Barrett notes that faith proceeds

not by the way of reason but by the confrontation of the whole man, Job, in the fullness and violence of his passion with the unknowable and overwhelming God. And the final solution for Job lies not in the rational resolution of the problem, any more than it ever does in life, but in a change and conversion of the whole man. The relation between Job and God is a relation between an I and a Thou, to use Martin Buber’s terms. Such a relation demands that each being confront the other in his completeness; it is not the confrontation of two rational minds each demanding an explanation that will satisfy reason. The relation between Job and God is on the level of existence and not of reason.<sup>90</sup>

Faith in this view comes not from rational detachment from the world in favor of reflection upon eternal essences, for there was no conception of an “eternal realm of essences, which Greek philosophy was to fabricate ... Such a realm of eternal essences is possible only for a *detached* intellect, one who, in Plato’s phrase, becomes a ‘spectator of all time and all existence.’”<sup>91</sup> The approach given in the Bible has an approach centered not on “the ideal of *detachment* as the path of wisdom which only the philosopher can tread ... [but] on *commitment*, the passionate involvement of man with his own mortal being (at once flesh and spirit), with his offspring, family, tribe, and God.”<sup>92</sup> This does not mean that the approach more typical of the Hebrew religion is anti-intellectual, but it does mean that the knowledge one possesses “is not the kind of knowledge that man can have through reason alone, or perhaps not through reason at all; he has

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<sup>88</sup> Aho, *Existentialism*, 1.

<sup>89</sup> Aho, *Existentialism*, 1.

<sup>90</sup> Barrett, *Irrational Man*, 73-74.

<sup>91</sup> Barrett, *Irrational Man*, 76.

<sup>92</sup> Barrett, *Irrational Man*, 77-78.

it rather through body and blood, bones and bowels, through trust and anger and confusion and love and fear; through his passionate adhesion in faith to the Being whom he can never intellectually know. This kind of knowledge a man has only through living, not reasoning.”<sup>93</sup> The Greeks, of course, knew of this as well, but they approached it through epic poetry and tragedy rather than through philosophy.

One does not reason one’s way to the truth as much as simply stand in need of God’s saving act of the impartation of revelation. Rudolf Bultmann convincingly argued that revelation in the New Testament “gives life.”<sup>94</sup> He cites in support of this conclusion the Gospel of Mark, arguing the the primary limitation faced by human beings in the Gospel narratives is death, and that “to reach salvation means ‘to enter life’ (Mark 9:43, 9:45, etc.) or ‘to inherit life’ (Mark 10:17, etc.).”<sup>95</sup> “Revelation,” says Bultmann, “can only be the gift of life through which death is overcome.”<sup>96</sup> This gift is given in the act of proclamation. One proclaims the story of Jesus crucified and resurrected for our sins, and if one accepts it as a personal address, as directed to them as an individual in the world and not in the sense of a general doctrine of truth, then one encounters the giver of life itself, God. “That Christ has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light has occurred through the *gospel*, for which the apostle has been appointed herald, preacher, and teacher.”<sup>97</sup> Revelation then is not about revealing a certain doctrine about life but rather life itself, writing that “revelation must be an occurrence that directly concerns *us*, that takes place in us ourselves.”<sup>98</sup> Bultmann later asks rhetorically, “What, then, has been

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<sup>93</sup> Barrett, *Irrational Man*, 79.

<sup>94</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, “The Concept of Revelation in the New Testament,” in *Existence and Faith*, trans. Schubert M. Ogden (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1960), 71.

<sup>95</sup> Bultmann, “The Concept of Revelation in the New Testament,” 71.

<sup>96</sup> Bultmann, “The Concept of Revelation in the New Testament,” 72.

<sup>97</sup> Bultmann, “The Concept of Revelation in the New Testament,” 77.

<sup>98</sup> Bultmann, “The Concept of Revelation in the New Testament,” 78.

revealed?”<sup>99</sup> Is it a particular form of metaphysics, perhaps corresponding to that of Plato, through which one can take solace in having discovered the workings of the world and the fate of the soul after death, as Socrates attempts in the *Phaedo*? Jesus certainly speaks of the soul as distinct from the body, lending credence to this idea. That Mark may have been influenced by body/soul dualism I do not deny. But, Bultmann argues, in the New Testament what has been revealed is

nothing at all, so far as the question concerning revelation asks for doctrines - doctrines, say, that no man could have discovered for himself - or for mysteries that become known once and for all as soon as they are communicated. On the other hand, however, everything has been revealed, insofar as man's eyes are opened concerning his own existence and he is once again able to understand himself ... Revelation does not provide this self-understanding, however, as a world-view that one grasps, possesses, and applies ... So little is faith the knowledge of some fact within the world or the willingness to hold some remarkable dogma to be true. Rather it is the obedience that obeys God not in general or *in abstracto*, but in the concrete now.<sup>100</sup>

Bultmann of course has the benefit of relying on the entire New Testament rather than just the Gospel of Mark. But when one looks at the Gospel of Mark one can see these ideas at work. Jesus's actual teachings in the Gospel of Mark are minimal. Matthew, Luke, and John both include a substantial amount of Jesus's teachings that Mark was either unaware of or omitted. He gives no philosophical speeches, as does Plato or Socrates. There is nothing approaching a Socratic dialogue. He does not articulate anything like a comprehensive metaphysics. There is the claim that the world is ending soon, and that one must care for the soul more than the body. While the author of Mark's Gospel may have been influenced in that regard by Plato, he does not give the comprehensive system that Plato provides. They are more like faint hints or gestures in

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<sup>99</sup> Bultmann, "The Concept of Revelation in the New Testament," 85.

<sup>100</sup> Bultmann, "The Concept of Revelation in the New Testament," 85-87.

that general direction. When Jesus is depicted as teaching, the majority of the time he does so in parables that frequently leave people confused.

Furthermore, this is a feature of the parables, not a defect in their performance. It is common in Churches today for people to extol the parables and remark how helpful it was for Jesus to give us these relatable little stories from everyday life to understand him better. That is emphatically not their purpose in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus there says to his disciples, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything comes in parables, in order that ‘they may indeed look but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven’” (Mark 4:11-12). The parables are intentionally designed to create that confusion! What Jesus comes to offer is life. That life is accepted when one follows Jesus and lives a life of service to others. If one needs assurances, for example, from a metaphysical system that guarantees, through the diligent application of reason, life in the age to come, one is not acting out of faith. If one requires a legal system that promises that one is in right standing with God provided they follow the rules, then one is not acting out of faith. If one requires signs of God’s favor in this life to be sure that one is in the right, for example through living a blessed life full of riches, family members, and positions of power, then one is not acting out of faith. The courage of faith is non-negotiable for Jesus in Mark. The assurance you get is the word of someone who died a God-forsaken death upon a cross. Mark will not even give us resurrection appearances. He just asks, “will you follow anyway?”

## **Conclusion**

What we were left with in the Gospel of Mark is very few ethical guarantees given to the reader. Readers do get the benefit of an exemplary hero to follow in the footsteps of, a hero free

from the immorality and cycles of failure that Plato was so critical of in his work. And one is also freed from dealing with the unjust and unreliable gods that populate stories like the *Iliad*. But one discovers what to do by having a direct encounter with God, through God's revelation, and responding in obedience. There is not the security of a system of rules and ethics one should follow apart from an encounter with God. There is no logical metaphysics given for making sense of the world and one's exact place in it. There is just the promise that if one follows Jesus, one is given the gift of life from God. One will accrue few benefits from this gift in this life. Even being forsaken by God is not taken off the table. The last characters we see in Mark are left in a state of fear. But Mark asks us as his readers and listeners if they will follow in the footsteps of the hero Jesus anyway, forsaking their fear and pressing on courageously.



## **Chapter Seven: Implications for Future Research and Conclusion**

In the preceding chapters, I have attempted to argue the case that one of the best and most helpful ways of viewing the story of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark is as a Greco-Roman hero story, albeit one that makes significant changes to the hero story as articulated by Homer. I first outlined the common characteristics of hero stories before explaining how Jesus in the Gospel of Mark fits that description. I then defended the idea that the author of the Gospel of Mark intentionally composed his story that way, rather than merely passing along eyewitness accounts inherited from oral tradition. I then looked to the *Iliad* for tensions in the hero story particularly related to courage and spent the rest of the dissertation explaining how the Gospel of Mark deals with these tensions. I looked first at the problem of death and honor in the ancient world, and how Mark's solution to both differs radically from the *Iliad*. I then utilized mimesis criticism to show how Jesus rejects the path of violence followed by most Greco-Roman heroes, creating a non-violent hero story. Here I utilized a story from the *Odyssey*. I then turned to the problem of justice and knowledge, how one is to learn courage and know the right course of action. Here I engaged in dialogue with Plato and his appraisal of the poetic tradition. I hope I have convincingly shown that Jesus is a very different kind of Greco-Roman hero in the Gospel of Mark.

However, as acknowledged in the introduction as well, this study has limitations. I mostly confined myself to Homer and Homeric reception. While I incorporated discussions of other hero figures as necessary, they were not my main focus. So to conclude this dissertation, I want to illustrate how this argument should impact our understanding of early Christianity and how it should be given to students of the New Testament as essential, not optional, background

information by looking outside of Homer to other figures, most especially that of Asclepius. I hope to show that I have only scratched the surface with what I have written, and that much more remains to be explored in the future, either by myself or by future New Testament scholars.

### **Early Christian Origins**

One area of research into early Christianity that should be impacted if my dissertation is convincing is in the telling of its origins. It is common knowledge in the wider field of New Testament studies that, while the Jesus movement started as a Jewish sect, it relatively quickly, within a few generations at most, became its own religious tradition. The very first writings we have from this movement are from the Apostle Paul, the apostle “to the gentiles” (Galatians 2:8). The Gospel of Mark, with its emphasis on the story of Jesus as the story of a hero, would be immediately understandable and interpretable by Gentiles as well. Emphasizing the continuities between the Gospel of Mark and Greco-Roman literature allows us better to explain why, in so short a time, the movement begun by Jesus severed ties with Judaism.

There is some evidence that early Christians recognized the parallels between Jesus and other Greco-Roman heroes and used these similarities to either attack or defend the newly formed religion. In a defense of the Christian faith, Justin Martyr remarked:

In saying that the Word, who is the first offspring of God, was born for us without sexual union, as Jesus Christ our Teacher, and that he was crucified and died and after rising again ascended into heaven we introduce nothing new beyond ... those whom you call sons of Zeus. You know how many sons of Zeus the writers whom you honor speak of—Hermes, the hermeneutic Word and teacher of all; Asclepius, who was also a healer and after being struck by lightning ascended into heaven—as did Dionysus who was torn in pieces; Heracles, who to escape his torments threw himself into the fire; the Dioscuri born of Leda and Perseus of Danae; and Bellerophon who, though of human origin, rode on the [divine] horse Pegasus. Need I mention Ariadne and those who like her are said to have been placed among the stars? And what of your deceased emperors, whom you regularly think worthy of being raised to immortality, introducing a witness who

swears that he saw the cremated Caesar ascending into heaven from the funeral pyre? ... When we say, as before, that he was begotten by God as the Word of God in a unique manner beyond ordinary birth, this should be no strange thing for you who speak of Hermes as the announcing word from God. If somebody objects that he was crucified, this is in common with the sons of Zeus, as you call them, who suffered, as previously listed. Since their fatal sufferings are narrated as not similar but different, so his unique passion should not seem to be any worse—indeed I will, as I have undertaken, show, as the argument proceeds, that he was better; for he is shown to be better by his actions. If we declare that he was born of a virgin, you should consider this something in common with Perseus. When we say that he healed the lame, the paralytic, and those born blind, and raised the dead, we seem to be talking about things like those said to have been done by Asclepius.<sup>1</sup>

Justin Martyr's point here is well-founded. As I have argued throughout, the story of Jesus *is* similar to the stories of other Greco-Roman heroes. The early Christians were, in fact, in lively conversation and debate with the followers of these figures, and argued that Jesus was just like the figures they venerated, only Jesus was “shown to be better [than them] by his actions.”

Another ancient witness can be found in Origen. Ancient critics of Christianity like Celsus complained that the early Christians were fabricating their history by making up stories inspired by Greco-Roman mythology. In a debate with Celsus, Origen granted his opponent's claim that there may be some merit to the similarities between Jesus and other Greco-Roman heroes, and that Christians should worship additional deities alongside the one God of Jesus, “*if, and only if, it can be shown that the earlier immortalized mortals received deification because of the virtuousness of their souls and their properly motivated benefactions to humanity.*”<sup>2</sup> Origen asks,

What great deed has Asklepios, or Dionysos, or Herakles done? And to which persons will they point for having made ethically better, and improved by their

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<sup>1</sup> Justin, *The First Apology of Justin, the Martyr*, 21-22, edited and translated by Edward Rochie Hardy, in *Early Christian Fathers*, edited by Cyril C. Richardson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/richardson/fathers.x.ii.iii.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Arlene Allan, “Herakles, ‘Christ-Curious’ Greeks and Revelation 5,” in *Herakles Inside and Outside the Church: From the First Apologists to the End of the Quattrocento*, ed. Arlene Allan, Eva Anagnostou-Laoutides, and Emma Stafford (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2020), 37.

words and way of life, in order to become gods? For many are the familiar stories regarding them, so let us see if they are without licentiousness or injustice, or foolishness, or cowardice. And if nothing of such a sort is found in them, Celsus' argument may well have strength, which would set those previously named on an equal footing with Jesus. But if it is clear that, while some matters regarding them are reputable, they are otherwise recorded as having done a myriad of things against upright reason, how could you properly say that rather than Jesus, these fellows, laying down their mortal body, became gods?<sup>3</sup>

In other words, Celsus would have a point that the similarities between these figures would be sufficient to inspire worship of them if they inspired their worshipers towards upright conduct, but their morality pales in comparison to Jesus's morals. Arlene Allan argues that "not even Herakles' choice of virtue over vice is sufficient to excuse the gluttony, licentiousness, and violence of his life contained in the more popular tales recounted outside the philosophers' circles."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, Jesus is worshiped by them and not these other figures. However, according to Allan again, the Church Fathers make plain that the struggle to break ordinary Christians free from worship of hero figures like Herakles took considerable time and effort. He writes,

It should come as no surprise, then, that converts to Christ continued to honour Herakles despite admonitions against doing so. As we know from the Church Fathers, converts to Christianity easily gave up neither their former gods and heroes, nor their ritual practices in relation to them; and the more rural the converts, the more likely they were to hold onto the old alongside the new. Augustine can still complain in the early fifth century, that many of his congregants hurry off to celebrate festivals in honour of 'idols' and continue to pray to them for personal benefit.<sup>5</sup>

So even if modern New Testament scholars make very little of the similarities between Jesus and Greco-Roman heroes, there is some evidence to suggest that they were obvious to many in the ancient world.

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<sup>3</sup> *Contra Celsum* 3.42.19-30, translated by Arlene Allan.

<sup>4</sup> Allan, "Herakles, 'Christ-Curious' Greeks and Revelation 5," 37.

<sup>5</sup> Allan, "Herakles, 'Christ-Curious' Greeks and Revelation 5," 38.

One of the foremost competitors to the Jesus movement in the ancient world was the cult of Asclepius, another Greco-Roman hero. In fact, “it seems that the Christians themselves realized that in Asclepius they faced their strongest enemy, the most dangerous antagonist of their Master.”<sup>6</sup> Emma and Ludwig Edelstein have argued that there is “a tone of uneasiness, an apprehension which is not apparent in the Christian censure of Zeus or Apollo, of Hera or Athena” when the topic turns to Asclepius.<sup>7</sup> The reason for this state of affairs is the remarkable similarities between the two figures. Jesus “resemble[d] Asclepius, the god of medicine, more than any other pagan divinity. It was the similarity between the deeds of Christ and of Asclepius that was bound to heighten the controversy between the Christian faith and the Asclepius religion.”<sup>8</sup> Jesus “concerned himself solely with assisting those who were in need of succor. So did Asclepius. Christ, like Asclepius, was sent into the world as a helper of men. Christ’s life on earth was blameless, as was that of Asclepius. Christ in his love of men invited his patients to come to him, or else he wandered about to meet them. This, too, could be said of Asclepius.”<sup>9</sup> The Christian attacks against Asclepius are one of the reasons the Edelstein’s can safely conclude “there can have been no stories of love affairs or of dissension, tales amoral in tone or character [regarding Asclepius.] Otherwise it would be incomprehensible that the Christian polemic, eager as it was to find fault with the outrageous behavior of the pagan gods, does not refer to any derogatory incident in the life of Asclepius.”<sup>10</sup> The fact was that Christians, eager to point out the faults of the rest of the Greek pantheon, could find nothing immoral in the stories of Asclepius to go after. Nor could the early Christians deny the healing power of Asclepius. The

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<sup>6</sup> Emma J. Edelstein and Ludwig Edelstein, *Asclepius: Collection and Interpretation of the Testimonies*, vol. 2 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 133.

<sup>7</sup> Edelstein, *Asclepius*, Vol. 2, 132.

<sup>8</sup> Edelstein, *Asclepius*, Vol. 2, 133.

<sup>9</sup> Edelstein, *Asclepius*, Vol. 2, 135.

<sup>10</sup> Edelstein, *Asclepius*, Vol. 2, 74.

Edelstein's write that "the Christians too admitted that in the temples of Asclepius miracles were brought about. They differed from the heathens only in so far as they considered them the work of Satan rather than of the true God."<sup>11</sup>

The similarities go beyond just these. The Edelstein's write that "the nature of the godhead of the two saviors was indisputably identical: both were man-gods ... Some of the early Christians even thought that their Master had been made immortal on account of his virtue. The same had been asserted of Asclepius ... While Christ was human and divine at the same time, Asclepius was called a terrestrial and intelligible god."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, "as far as Christianity can be compared at all to any of the Greek and Roman cults, the Asclepius ideal seems nearest to the ideal of Christ ... For [Asclepius] had been the embodiment of the highest expectations which men cherished, of the highest values which they had known before the ancient world was shattered."<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Asclepius, according to Frances Flannery, "was commonly referred to as 'The Physician' as well as 'Soter,' or Savior."<sup>14</sup>

Some of the similarities even extend to the minor details of their stories. Mark 8:23-24 tells the story of Jesus healing a blind man. Jesus takes the man outside of town, and "when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, "Can you see anything" (Mark 8:23). Asclepius likewise was known for healing with objects. In the case of "Valerius Aper, a blind soldier, the god revealed that he should go and take blood of a white cock along

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<sup>11</sup> Edelstein, *Asclepius*, Vol. 2, 161.

<sup>12</sup> Edelstein, *Asclepius*, Vol. 2, 136.

<sup>13</sup> Edelstein, *Asclepius*, Vol. 2, 138.

<sup>14</sup> Frances Flannery, "Talitha Qum! An Exploration of the Image of Jesus as Healer-Physician-Savior in the Synoptic Gospels in Relation to the Asclepius Cult," in *Coming Back to Life: The Permeability of Past and Present, Mortality and Immortality, Death and Life in the Ancient Mediterranean*, ed. Frederick S. Tappenden (Montreal, QC: McGill University Library and Archives, 2017), 415.

with honey and compound an eye salve and for three days should apply it to his eyes. And he could see again and went and publicly offered thanks to the god.”<sup>15</sup>

After Jesus had supplied the saliva, “the man looked up and said, ‘I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.’ Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again, and he looked intently, and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly” (Mark 8:24-25). There is an inscription for Asclepius that likewise reads, “The blind man saw a dream. It seemed to him that the god [Asclepius] came up to him and with his fingers opened his eyes, and that he first saw the trees in the sanctuary. At daybreak he walked out sound.”<sup>16</sup> This is not a strong enough connection to suggest Mark imitated this inscription, but it does show that the healing stories in the Gospel reflect broader cultural trends.

Jesus and Asclepius were not identical however. In the healing story described previously, healing comes directly from Jesus’s person. Even the salve Jesus uses is just his own saliva. Asclepius would imbue rocks or other items with special power the supplicant could use as a cure. The Edelstein’s note “that which was revolutionary in Christ, that which was novel and unheard-of did not find any correspondence in Asclepius: Jesus came to heal not only the sick in body and soul; he extended his help to ‘the sinners and publicans.’ Asclepius, as a Greek god, had rejected those who were impure, those who did not think holy thoughts.”<sup>17</sup> Jesus came precisely for those people and extended the offer of healing and salvation even to them. The early Christians distinguished themselves through the universality of their compassion, engaging in acts of healing regardless of whether the recipient was deemed “worthy” or not. This is a

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<sup>15</sup> *Inscriptiones Graecae*, 14.966, quoted in Wendy Cotter, “Miracle Stories: The God Asclepius, the Pythagorean Philosophers, and the Roman Rulers,” in *The Historical Jesus in Context*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine, Dale C. Allison, and John Dominic Crossan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 171.

<sup>16</sup> *Inscriptiones Graecae*, 4.1.121-22.18, quoted in Wendy Cotter, “Miracle Stories: The God Asclepius, the Pythagorean Philosophers, and the Roman Rulers,” 171.

<sup>17</sup> Edelstein, *Asclepius*, Vol. 2, 134.

major difference, and paints Jesus as being much more indiscriminately compassionate than Asclepius. One need not be pure or just to receive healing from Jesus, as one must be to be healed by Asclepius. All that is required is the person's faith.

One example of a scholar who has helpfully incorporated knowledge of Asclepius into their understanding of the Gospel of Mark is Frances Flannery. One episode Flannery discusses at length is Jesus's bringing Jairus's daughter back from the dead. The Gospel of Mark reads,

When they came to the home of the synagogue leader, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. He went in and said to them, 'Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep.' But they laughed at him. After he put them all out, he took the child's father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, "*Talitha kum!*" (which means "Little girl, I say to you, get up!"). Immediately the girl stood up and began to walk around (she was twelve years old). (Mark 5:38-42)

Flannery notes that, when Jesus comes to raise the daughter of Jairus back from the dead, Jesus says that "the child is not dead but asleep" (τὸ παιδίον οὐκ ἀπέθανεν ἀλλὰ καθεύδει) (Mark 5:39). It would have made at least as much sense to claim that "the child is not dead but alive." So why the emphasis on sleeping? Flannery argues that "we are in the locus of motifs from the Asclepius cult: an ill person lay asleep while the physician deity stands next to her/him to heal the patient. Since Jesus proceeds ... to heal the girl who is 'sleeping' (καθεύδει), the texts readily evoke the image of the god Asclepius, who stands by sleeping patients and heals them with an outstretched hand."<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the request by Jairus to come and lay hands upon her (Mark 8:23) has connections with Asclepius. Flannery notes, "While in some cures Asclepius prescribes a medicine or course of treatment, he was also known as *apochair* ("from the hand") for his curative touch that he applied to sleeping incubants at his healing temples; hence, standard

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<sup>18</sup> Flannery, "*Talitha Qum!* An Exploration of the Image of Jesus as Healer-Physician-Savior in the Synoptic Gospels in Relation to the Asclepius Cult," 418.



iconography depicts him reaching out to lay his hand(s) on sleeping patients.”<sup>19</sup> Even the fact that Jesus comes to visit the girl sets off a likely contrast with Asclepius. Asclepius did not come to the sick; rather, the sick were required to visit his shrine and take the necessary steps given them by the priests in hopes of receiving a dream from the god. This fact rules out the possibility that Asclepius could have ever healed Jairus’s daughter. She could not make the trip to an Asklepieion to be healed. The Asklepieion was helpful, but “the elaborate rituals ... were not conducive to dire emergency cases nor to resurrecting the dead. By contrast, the Gospel story implies, this girl is fortunate because her father relies on Jesus. The story is making the point that Jesus is a doctor who makes house calls!”<sup>20</sup>

Sandwiched in the middle of the story of raising Jairus’s daughter is the story of Jesus healing a hemorrhaging woman. That story notes that “she had endured much under many physicians and had spent all that she had, and she was no better but rather grew worse” (Mark 5:26). This could be read as implicit criticism of the Asclepius cult. Flannery argues, “Given the reputation of Asclepius for extracting his fee, this may be read as a criticism at the kinds of human physicians for whom the god served as patron.”<sup>21</sup>

But it is also noteworthy that, in the Gospel of Mark, the text is explicit that the woman’s faith is what made her well (Mark 5:34). This emphasis on the importance of faith is harder to detect in the Asclepius cult. Flannery writes,

Other cure tales explain that a person could still be cured even with no belief in the cures, if only the promised fee was paid (i.e., if ritual obligations were fulfilled). Such was the case of a woman who ridiculed the posted cures but had a dream in which the god required her to dedicate ‘a silver pig in the sanctuary as a

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<sup>19</sup> Flannery, “*Talitha Qum!* An Exploration of the Image of Jesus as Healer-Physician-Savior in the Synoptic Gospels in Relation to the Asclepius Cult,” 419.

<sup>20</sup> Flannery, “*Talitha Qum!* An Exploration of the Image of Jesus as Healer-Physician-Savior in the Synoptic Gospels in Relation to the Asclepius Cult,” 420.

<sup>21</sup> Flannery, “*Talitha Qum!* An Exploration of the Image of Jesus as Healer-Physician-Savior in the Synoptic Gospels in Relation to the Asclepius Cult,” 421.

memorial of her ignorance.’ She was cured after awakening, despite her unbelief, as long as she paid afterwards.<sup>22</sup>

Healing depending on paying the required fees to the Asklepieion. It was not done for free, and faith did not matter. Indeed, “for the chronically ill, participation in the Asclepius cult was complex, expensive, and time consuming, necessitating vast geographical travel with no guarantee of a cure.”<sup>23</sup> In the Jesus story, by contrast, all that is required is the woman’s sincere faith.

The rivalry with Asclepius that can be seen in the early centuries of Christianity would be an oddity if my thesis is incorrect and there is no connection between the Gospel accounts and the stories of heroes and gods like Asclepius. It must have come about through a Hellenization process following the production of the Gospels. If my thesis is correct however, it makes complete sense that the ultimate rival to Jesus would be another Greco-Roman hero and divine figure. Those are the figures Jesus was modeled after, so of course they would serve as his primary rivals. To quote Flannery again,

This is ... a way to make a programmatic claim for the future that positions Christianity over a competing cult. Unlike Asclepius, the Gospels stress, Jesus heals the dead with divine approval. Unlike in the dream cult, the sick can be healed without travel to a Temple if only they have faith, regardless of their socio-economic and purity standings. These Gospel portraits testify that Christian comparisons between Jesus and Asclepius adhered already in the first century, establishing a social framing for the memory of Jesus that intensified over the next several centuries.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Flannery, “*Talitha Qum!* An Exploration of the Image of Jesus as Healer-Physician-Savior in the Synoptic Gospels in Relation to the Asclepius Cult,” 425.

<sup>23</sup> Flannery, “*Talitha Qum!* An Exploration of the Image of Jesus as Healer-Physician-Savior in the Synoptic Gospels in Relation to the Asclepius Cult,” 416.

<sup>24</sup> Flannery, “*Talitha Qum!* An Exploration of the Image of Jesus as Healer-Physician-Savior in the Synoptic Gospels in Relation to the Asclepius Cult,” 429.

This is a much more plausible reading of the text of the Gospel of Mark, and of early Christian history, than that provided by the alternative, which suggests these comparisons were limited to the impressions of later Gentile readers, and not an inherent part of the Gospel itself.

### **Background to the New Testament**

Another implication of this dissertation is the need to expand the material considered relevant background for the New Testament. The Jewish roots of Jesus are emphasized far more than the Greco-Roman world and its religious traditions, and when the wider Greco-Roman world is acknowledged at all in discussions of the Gospel of Mark, those mentions are often restricted to how Gentiles may have chosen to read the text, rather than seeing them as intentionally evoked by the author. As an example, Adela Yarbro Collins helpfully acknowledges the Greco-Roman background to Mark in several places, including in an essay on how Mark would have been received “among Greeks and Romans.”<sup>25</sup> In this essay, she forthrightly claims that readers of Mark’s baptism story would have seen parallels between the Gospel of Mark and Greco-Roman literature, stating, “As Aesop was given gifts of wise speech by Isis and the Muses, Jesus is endowed with the divine spirit on this occasion, the power that enables him to teach with authority, to heal, and to cast out demons.”<sup>26</sup> Therefore, “those in the audience of Mark who were familiar with such traditions were likely to interpret this scene as an analogous legend and to view Jesus as an heroic figure analogous to the great poets and sages of Greek tradition.”<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, rather than explore this identification of Jesus as a heroic figure, she then moves on to other parallels. She does not press this identification further as part

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<sup>25</sup> Collins, *Collected Essays on the Gospel According to Mark*, 80-95.

<sup>26</sup> Collins, *Collected Essays on the Gospel According to Mark*, 83.

<sup>27</sup> Collins, *Collected Essays on the Gospel According to Mark*, 83.

of Mark's literary strategy; it remains an implication someone familiar with Hellenistic culture could draw, but nothing more. I would want to press this further and argue that the parallels between Jesus and Greco-Roman heroes are so compelling they should be seen as intentional on the part of the author, and a useful tool for understanding the Gospel as a whole. Understanding not just Second Temple Judaism but the world of Greco-Roman religion is necessary for a full understanding of Mark.

To take another example, Collins also sees the connection with Asclepius, but again limits the implications of these parallels to interesting observations someone could make. She writes that "at Epidaurus various healings of Asclepius were commemorated in formal inscriptions, including the healing of a man with a lame hand, a woman who was blind in one eye, a mute boy, two cases involving a blind man, two cases affecting a paralytic, and two cases dealing with a lame man."<sup>28</sup> She even notes that "there was also a tradition that the mortal Asclepius raised the dead Hippolytus and that, for his audacity, Zeus punished him by killing him with a thunderbolt. Thus, the story of Jesus raising Jairus's daughter would also elicit a comparison with Asclepius."<sup>29</sup> Yet again, however, she does not press any further than her broader purpose for the chapter, in which she is "interested in those members of Mark's audience who were more familiar with Greek and Roman religious traditions than with Jewish traditions and who preferred, whether consciously or unconsciously, to interpret Christian proclamation about Jesus in Greek or Roman terms."<sup>30</sup>

Plenty of additional background material from the Greco-Roman world may inform the Gospel of Mark and should be taken into account. To provide additional examples, there was the

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<sup>28</sup> Collins, *Collected Essays on the Gospel According to Mark*, 84.

<sup>29</sup> Collins, *Collected Essays on the Gospel According to Mark*, 84-85.

<sup>30</sup> Collins, *Collected Essays on the Gospel According to Mark*, 81.

story discussed above of Jesus raising Jairus's daughter from the dead. Compare this story with another told of Apollonius of Tyana by Philostratus:

A girl had died just in the hour of her marriage, and the bridegroom was following her bier lamenting as was natural, his marriage left unfulfilled, and the whole of Rome was mourning with him, for the maiden belonged to a consular family. Apollonius then, witnessing their grief, said, "Put down the bier, for I will stay the tears that you are shedding for this maiden." And ... he asked what was her name. The crowd accordingly thought that he was about to deliver such an oration as is commonly delivered as much to grace the funeral as to stir up lamentation; but he did nothing of the kind, but merely touching her and whispering in secret some spell over her, at once woke up the maiden from her seeming death; and the girl spoke out loud, and returned to her father's house, just as Alcestis did when she was brought back to life by Hercules.<sup>31</sup>

Again, I am not suggesting that the Gospel of Mark is here imitating Philostratus directly. The parallels are too generic for that. What I do insist upon is understanding that very similar stories were told about others in the wider Greco-Roman world as were told about Jesus. Readers would have been expected to see that Jesus was a healer like these other figures. But unlike these other figures, who use spells to bring the dead back to life, Jesus needs no such aids. He just tells her to get up, and she does. His words have authority on their own; he needs no spells or magical trickery to perform miracles (Mark 1:27).

As a constructive example of what pointing out these parallels could look like, a recent article by Zorodzai Dube argues that Jesus's claim to have bound the strong man in Mark 3:27 "only makes sense if there were competing healers such as Asclepius and Apollo who rival Jesus' healing power. As such, Mark's healing stories are plausible as an identity marker, reminding the adherents of Jesus' healing household that their healer is the greatest physician."<sup>32</sup> The Gospel of Mark is setting up a rivalry between Jesus and Asclepius intentionally and wants

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<sup>31</sup> Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 4.45, quoted in Wendy Cotter, "Miracle Stories: The God Asclepius, the Pythagorean Philosophers, and the Roman Rulers," 175.

<sup>32</sup> Zorodzai Dube, "Reception of Jesus as Healer in Mark's Community," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 74, no. 1 (2018): para. 16, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i1.4952>.

his readers and hearers to make this connection. As another example, Dube notes that, in the healing of Simon's mother-in-law in Mark 1:30-31, she is healed instantly. This functions, according to Dube's argument, as "an indirect invitation to patients who had slept for days waiting for the visitation of the god at the temples of Asclepius."<sup>33</sup> Whereas being healed by Asclepius could take days and involve many different special objects, Jesus heals directly and immediately. Mark also in several places makes note of how widespread Jesus's fame as a healer spread, "putting him at the same level as famous healers such as Asclepius or Apollo."<sup>34</sup> I think there are no good reasons not to see this as intentional on the part of the author of Mark. It would be much more surprising if Mark was to tell the story of a famous, renowned healer using the stories of Greco-Roman heroes as a template and *not* have Asclepius in mind as a competing figure.

Another related issue, outside the scope of this dissertation, to address would be other parallels to the Greco-Roman world, such as the mystery cults. Some of these parallels have been noticed in the past, but have been dismissed as "parallelomania" on the part of the skeptical scholars. Samuel Sandmel writes that "we might for our purposes define parallelomania as that extravagance among scholars which first overdoes the supposed similarity in passages and then proceeds to describe source and derivation as if implying literary connection flowing in an inevitable or predetermined direction."<sup>35</sup> But if it appears plausible to treat texts like the Gospel of Mark as texts grounded in Hellenistic Judaism, with the "Hellenism" part being just as important a designation as the "Judaism" part, then there really is no good reason for being so dismissive. The reason the Jesus movement appears to, in at least some respects, resemble a

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<sup>33</sup> Dube, "Reception of Jesus as Healer in Mark's Community," para. 18.

<sup>34</sup> Dube, "Reception of Jesus as Healer in Mark's Community," para. 21.

<sup>35</sup> Samuel Sandmel, "Parallelomania," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81, no. 1 (1962), 1.

mystery religion is because it does in fact resemble a mystery religion, that all the formative influences on the Gospel of Mark were not just from Judaism but intentionally resembled other related phenomena in the surrounding culture. This need not be threatening or an exercise in parallelomania but a recognition of real historical influences.

### **Conclusion**

The Gospel of Mark is an incredibly thought-provoking, carefully constructed, piece of literature. Far from uncritically copying down sayings of Jesus on a thin narrative thread, the Gospel is a serious intellectual response to ideas relevant to any serious-minded person in the Hellenistic world. Recognizing this changes our appraisal of the author of Mark, enhances our understanding of early Christian history, and challenges the way that history is told today. It also reveals the Gospel to be very much involved in contemporaneous debates over how to live an authentic and meaningful human life, the kind of life that endures forever. Homer remains celebrated for his monumental literary achievements, and I hope I have gone some way towards convincing my readers that the Gospel of Mark is also a significant literary achievement, worthy of close examination and of our full intellectual and existential engagement.

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